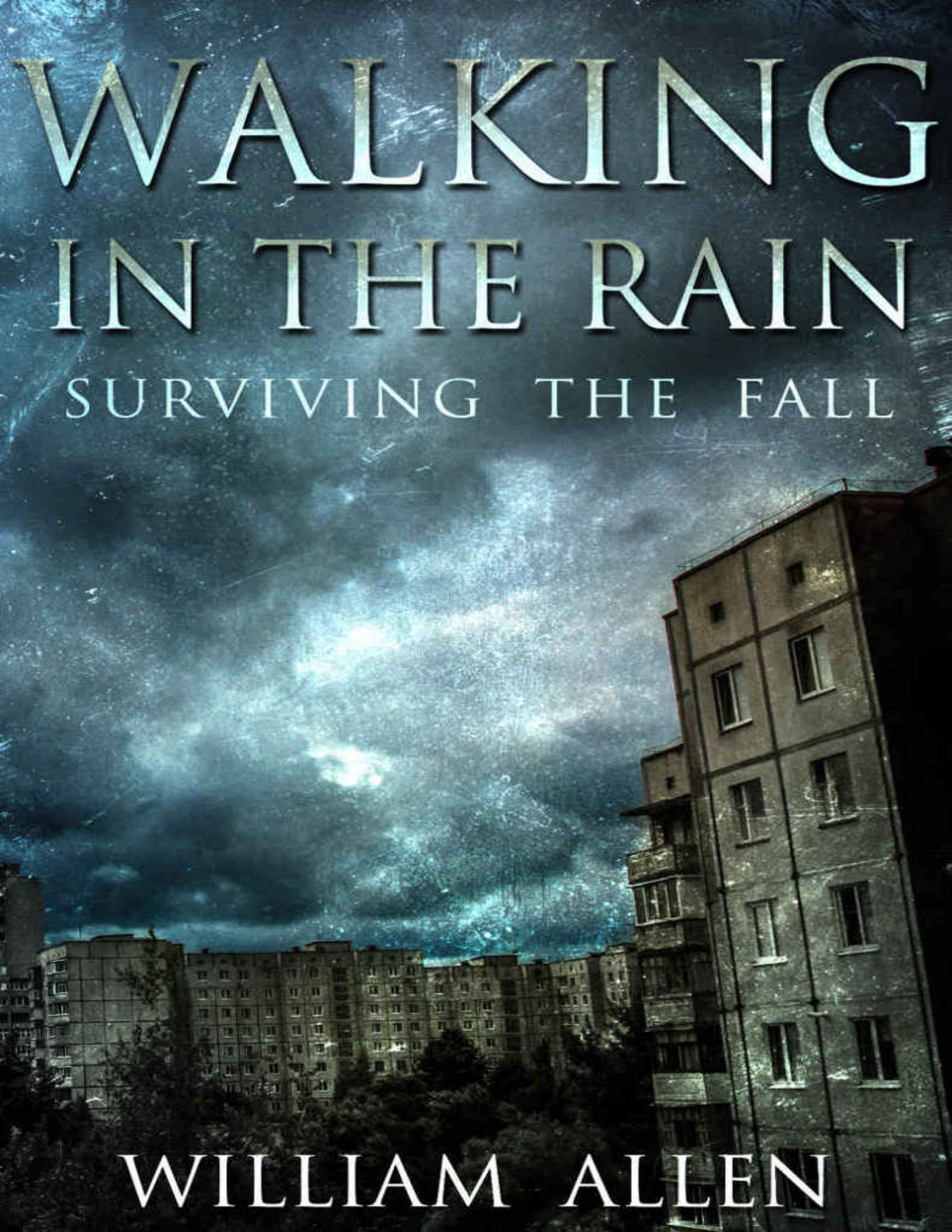




WALKING IN THE RAIN

SURVIVING THE FALL

WILLIAM ALLEN

WALKING IN THE RAIN

Book One:

Surviving the Fall

By

William Allen

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This is a work of fiction and no part of this story is intended to depict real persons, living or dead, or any actual locations. The use of some place names is purely fictional and any similarity is purely coincidental.

Dedicated to Afentra Allen; a wonderful wife without whom none of this would have been possible. Maybe someday I'll be able to convince her to read this story.

And my great thanks to TJ Reeder, WJ Lundy and Dale Power. All three are great authors and even better people who inspired and encouraged me to finish this project.

CHAPTER ONE

The sound of a disturbance in the house woke me from an exhausted slumber. My pistol found my hand even before I rolled off the pallet in that dark room. Selected for its isolation in a mostly undeveloped subdivision, the house had already been looted and trashed. Perfect, I decided, for a single night of sleeping under a

roof. The last few days of rain had left my gear soggy and in need of attention. Now, my plan wasn't feeling so good.

Working by feel, I quietly packed up my little camp in the wrecked laundry room, my ears straining for more clues. What had woken me was the clatter of some aluminum cans I'd stacked haphazardly around the broken front door, designed to act as a low tech alarm system. Over the hammering of my heart, I could make out booted footfalls as multiple intruders proceeded deeper into the house. Through the closed inner door, all I could tell was more than one but less than five. I had a self imposed bag limit of no more than three bandits or looters on any given day, so this was probably a good time to boogie.

Finished with stuffing my backpack, I slid closer to the side door leading out to the garage. My fingers slid along the bottom of the door jamb until I felt the rubber door stopper wedged in place. A similar rubber triangle sealed the door leading back into the house. From experience, I knew the little stoppers would hold in place where a deadbolt might fail. They'd saved my rear before and I was always careful to pack them for the next use. As I continued my prep for a hasty retreat, my ears picked up another sound and I froze.

A pathetic whimper, followed by the unmistakable smack of a hand striking flesh, all echoed in the space of a heart beat. My blood began to simmer and my anger overrode good sense. For the better part of two months I'd been on my own, surviving in this brutal new world and my brain already held a lifetime's worth of terrible images locked away. The sights, sounds and stench of death dogged my steps and once again, I had reached my limit.

As I sat there in the dark and stuffed the last half dried sweatshirt into the backpack I heard another pitiful cry. Whatever else happened tonight, and though it might cost me my life, I decided some sorry piece of crap was about to pay the price for ruining my sleep.

The flimsy wooden door opened without a sound and I found myself nearly blinded by the pearly glow of the moon shining down through the kitchen windows. The moonlight was a surprise since I was bedded down before dark, and the last few nights had been stormy and overcast. Once my eyes adjusted, I found I could see quite well as I made my way further back into the house with soft footed stealth.

I found the intruders gathered in the master bedroom at the back of the house. A quick peek around the door frame showed three large forms arrayed in a semicircle around a fourth, tiny shape cast down on the stained and discolored mattress. The girl was malnourished, naked and rolled up in a fetal ball as she apparently tried to cover her exposed flesh. One of the men laughed, a low dark chuckle, and stepped closer to the bed.

I shot him first.

Three shots total, one each to the back of the head or top of the spine, and each report of the 9mm pistol sounded like thunder in the enclosed space. It was

murder, plain and simple. The men went down like dropped bags of laundry, and two of them continued to twitch after hitting the floor.

Since I was low on ammunition, I had to forego the follow up shots, the double tap as my father taught. Always take that insurance shot, and make sure they are 100% dead. Instead, I had to settle with slashing their throats and despite the extra holes I'd put in their heads, each man still managed to gush a torrent of blood out through the fresh wound.

None of the blood or piss or shit stink bothered me, not anymore, so I went about my business. I even managed to do the job without getting much blood on their boots, but their shirts were too far gone to salvage.

For throat cutting and other mayhem, I used a chipped and bent old butcher knife salvaged from a restaurant somewhere up north. With a nine inch blade and a curved handguard, the thing looked scarier than the short "survival" knife I used to actually cut up and process animals. I did not mix the two. Sort of like keeping kosher, I thought wryly. Don't use the knife for cutting human throats to also cut up your dinner. Humans are filthy animals, after all. Yep, I was adapting fine to this new world.

"Little girl, stay still. I won't hurt you, alright?"

That got a frightened nod, and a few snuffles. She was laying with her knees drawn up to her chin and her arms crossed over her tiny boobs.

As soon as I made sure the traumatized naked girl wasn't going to shoot or stab me, I began stripping the bodies and salvaging their gear. I found three handguns, two revolvers and a big semi automatic pistol, along with three spare magazines. Also, I dug about fifty rounds of loose ammunition from the pockets of the dead men, along with a couple of folding blade knives and what I thought were silver coins. Just a few dimes and quarters, but I took them anyway. Two of the men had sheathed knives on belts and I took the knives and belts to examine later. Everything had a use, for trading if nothing else.

I found a pair of long arms, a lever action rifle and a pump shotgun, propped against the inside wall of the room. In the darkness I couldn't make out much detail, but both of those were certainly going with. Piled up in the nearby corner I found three packs bulging with interesting shapes. Two were daypacks, like I used to carry to school as a bookbag, and the third looked like a genuine camping backpack. I hoped they had more ammo in the bags somewhere.

"What...what are you doing?"

The voice was so soft, barely above a whisper. I turned my head to see the young girl looking at me with a mixture of fear and something else etched into her fair blonde features. A smudge marred her left cheek and I realized it was a handprint. Likewise, the cut on her high cheekbone dribbled a trace of blood. I could tell she'd tried hard to quell the tears that tracked down her face and left a pink tracery on one side.

"I'm just taking things they won't need anymore." I tried to pitch my voice softly but the words came out sounding flat. Empty of emotion.

"They don't need me anymore," came her breathy, frightened response and I took a second to understand her comment. Was that an offer, or a plea? Whatever it was, I chose to ignore it for the moment. Somebody had to have heard those shots, so I was on short time to get going before nosy neighbors came looking. Or more scavengers.

Heading back to the utility room, I scooped up my own heavily laden backpack and returned to the bedroom to find the girl had moved. She'd wisely stayed clear of the pile of weapons I had unloaded in front of her but she was trying to make some kind of dress or cloak out of the moldy and stained comforter rucked up on the bed.

"Leave that" I said, and dug a long sleeved sweatshirt out of the pack and tossed it to her. The sweatshirt was made to look like a jersey of the Kansas City Chiefs and came in a size XX.

"Get that on for now. The jersey is long enough to cover you until I can get you back to your family."

The girl looked down, her hands covering her bare chest with the red and white Chiefs sweatshirt clutched tight. Standing, she was taller than I first thought, but painfully thin. I could see her ribs and her thighs looked barely larger than my forearms. She had a fey, wild, beauty about her that made her seem almost other than human. Like one of those elves in the *Lord of the Rings* movies. I had to make my eyes turn away as she lifted the hem of the shirt and pulled it over her head. Against my better judgment, I hazarded another look and then I wanted to punch myself in the eye for looking.

"I got no family left, no kinfolks. I think they killed my uncle when they took me. They beat him something terrible, anyway. If he ain't dead, he ought to be." She said the last with a bitter whisper. She took a gasping breath before continuing.

"They didn't steal me. He was trying to rent me to them. Uncle Kevin only got beat up when he tried to hold out for more food."

Her voice was still a bit breathy, shocked sounding, and definitely country. Not the same country accent as back home, but still close. I found myself responding with my own country twang coming to the forefront.

"Don't you have anybody, girl? Friends in the neighborhood?"

"No friends here. Anybody else in this neighborhood would only feed me if I did what those animals wanted to do to me. Girls ain't worth much unless they are earning their way. If you take me with you, I can help."

Again, she stopped for a long, considering pause.

"I won't sleep with you, but I am pretty good at hunting and finding plants to eat and ... I got nothing else."

While I listened to the girl speak, I ejected the magazine on my pistol and replaced the three rounds expended with what I carried in my front pocket. The Ruger P95 was heavy for a 9mm but deadly accurate out to twenty five yards and simple to clean for a semiautomatic pistol.

"Have you seen these guys before? They part of a gang or something around here?" I asked, wondering how deep I'd gotten myself in the shit. At least they weren't wearing uniforms this time.

"Yeah," she answered, picking her words carefully. "They have people who will be looking for them before long. We need to get going."

I almost laughed at her attitude, assuming she was going with me.

"What's your name?" I asked instead, shouldering my pack and adjusting the straps.

"Amy. Amy Landon. What's yours?"

"Luke. Please to meet you. Now, we need to get out of here but you can't go around barefoot. Come over here and give me a hand."

Amy wrinkled her nose as I gestured to the three dead men but she knelt down and started trying on the boots I had already removed. While Amy was looking for footwear, I scooped up the rifle and the shotgun and the three packs the would-be rapists had discarded. Thankfully, the rifle bore a makeshift sling made of paracord so that went over my shoulder. Snaking my left arm through the loops, I hung the surprisingly heavy packs in the crook of my arm for now. Awkward, but doable for a little while.

I hung on to the shotgun after checking to make sure it was loaded. The extended tube was a nice bonus and when I racked the slide repeatedly I was rewarded with eight shells. I couldn't make out the loads but this was definitely a 12 gauge. I reloaded the shotgun and turned to the young girl.

Amy found the smallest pair of boots and laced them up tight. They looked like clown shoes even in the scant moonlight let in by the tattered curtains, but the girl did not complain. She would get blisters if we had to go very far but I just wanted to get some distance between us and this place. I asked her to tie the laces together and grab the other two as well, which she did. She then took the two smaller packs from my arm, which was a great help.

"Let's move," I said softly and Amy nodded, ready to go as well. We headed back through the kitchen and I led Amy out through the utility room and into the garage. The back door from the house emptied into a high fenced yard, but the side door out of the garage allowed us to creep out into an alley of sorts. This overgrown route extended to the treeline and was bounded on both sides by the wooden privacy fences.

I worried about being trapped in such an obvious shooting gallery but sometimes you traded speed for stealth. After what Amy said, maybe gunshots were

not such an unusual sound around these parts after dark. For whatever reason, no one seemed to notice our passage.

“Just a little ways,” I said encouragingly, “and we can hole up for a while in the woods.”

“But it’s still dark, and there’s animals out there,” Amy whispered in protest, fear once again sounding in her voice.

“There’re animals everywhere, Amy. I just killed three of them in that bedroom. Trust me, we will be safer out there for a little while.”

And the crazy thing was, she went with me without another word.

CHAPTER TWO

Mindful of Amy’s lack of proper clothing and footwear, I stopped after only a thousand yards and found us a spot near a small stream. I’d scouted this area earlier in the day before committing to the house, so I knew the sheltered patch was screened by trees and a mass of bushes that would conceal us once we were inside.

I probably should have picked this spot to spend the night, in hindsight, but I just wanted one night without having to wrestle with the tarp or endure dripping rain.

"In there?" Amy croaked.

"Sure, kid. This will be fine for a few hours. Let me go in first but follow me, okay?"

As before, the cozy little hideaway was unoccupied by anything bigger than field mice, which got me thinking about what all I still needed to do. Shucking my pack, I fished out a handful of wire loop traps and stuffed them in my jacket pocket. Even in the little bit of moonlight penetrating our new lair, I saw the question on Amy's face.

"Let me go see about breakfast and I'll be right back to help you get situated."

Without giving the girl time to protest, I slipped back out and quickly found sign of four nearby rabbit runs. The hunters may have claimed all the big game in these woods but the rabbits and squirrels still found ways to survive. Carefully placing my homemade wire loop traps, I hoped to be able to snare a few by morning. Maybe, maybe not, depending on circumstances beyond my control. Life was like that now, and the quicker a person figured this out, the better their chances of surviving.

"How are your feet?" I asked, once I returned to take a seat across from Amy.

"Okay, but my heels feel a little blistered. I really need some socks, I guess. I wish we could go back to my uncle's house, but that will be the first place those looting bastards will look."

"That's true. I have some socks you can use. So, how many other guys in that group of scavengers?"

"There's, like, seven or eight of them living in two houses up the street. I heard they came out of Branson, and one morning they just took over the neighborhood. Killed some of the men, and you can guess what they did to the women. The rest will come looking."

"We should be safe here for the next few hours. Try to get some sleep. I'll keep watch since I already got like six or seven hours downtime before this happened. Alright?"

I heard leaves rustling as Amy tried to get comfortable. I thought about her trying to sleep with only the sweat shirt to wear and detached my rolled up tarp from the back of my pack and pushed it in her direction.

"Wrap up in this for now. That will help keep you warm and dry."

"What are you going to do, Luke?"

"Like I said, I'll keep watch. Don't need it right now. You just try to rest. We'll need to move out of here quick before first light."

With a mumbled okay, Amy rolled herself up in the scavenged plastic cover and nestled down in the leaves. I listened to her breathing even out after a while and her sleep seemed untroubled. I wondered about that. She never mentioned her parents, and her home with her uncle now seemed lost to her. What is a little girl supposed to do in this situation? How can she even sleep right now, lying in the bushes with a complete stranger who less than an hour ago murdered three men in front of her?

Those thoughts led to home, and how these events might impact my traveling. I kept coming back to why I felt the need to interfere. I wasn't particularly brave, nor did I think I was somehow invincible. These last two months taught me all I needed to know about how fragile life, my life, could be when the rule of law no longer existed.

I rarely acted on instinct. In fact, my father more than once told me I tended to overanalyze things. So why did I agree to let this unknown girl come with me? I'd helped people out in the past, what little I could and without endangering myself too much, but never invited someone to travel with me. And why her? Despite her claims, I knew she would be a burden. She did not appear capable of defending herself, and a second mouth to feed would certainly drain my resources.

I didn't reach any conclusions that night. Maybe it was because somehow she reminded me of my little sister. Not in her looks, but that she was sort of small and weak. Amy was actually about five foot six or so, but painfully thin. Gaunt, really. In comparison, I stood nearly six three already and before the lights went out I was well muscled from working on the farm and spending time in the weight room. I'd dropped some pounds of course, but my height made me loom over the girl anyway.

On the other hand, this could have been something due to delayed guilt for all the innocent people I saw and couldn't help. Or perhaps, my subconscious was telling me I was getting weird without sufficient human contact. One thing I did conclude was after two months of being on my own, I was really lonely.

These thoughts got my memories of walking out of that dark, stinking pile of concrete and glass as I left behind the hotel to start this journey. I remembered those first few frantic hours of trying to navigate unfamiliar streets while the world had fallen apart. A week into the blackout and as I passed piles of corpses stacked in the streets I kept muttering "Too late, too late" under my breath. That prick Mr. Selzer made me wait almost too long to begin my escape from the city. Idly, I wondered if the blind sheep was still huddled there in his room on the eighth floor, waiting for the government to come save him.

As the first tentative rays of the sun began to lighten the sky, still shy of dawn, I roused from my hard thoughts and set about checking what I'd gleaned from yesterday's salvage. First, though, I needed to get my backpack squared away for this day's journey. Extra space in the big backpack was available. I just had to fold up the shirts and pants I stuffed in haphazardly the night before. I also drug out two pairs of rolled up white athletic socks that would go to Amy. Another loan, not a gift. She would have to do her own salvaging. She needed better footwear but the thick socks

would help short term. While I was at it, I withdrew a pair of gray sweat pants for the girl to cover herself with, noting that the drawstrings remained in place.

The three handguns from the looters garnered a quick looksee and the prize of the trio was a Glock 21 with three spare magazines. Score one for the good guys, I thought. I set the pistol aside until later for examination, along with the two revolvers. They would need a cleaning and a takedown before I would trust my life to them. I knew the Ruger would work until then.

Once my own backpack was situated, I began going through the smaller packs the dead men had been carrying. Candles, lighters, small trinkets and useless rolls of cash confirmed these bags contained salvage. I decided as each man gleaned items from the neighborhood, they stowed their treasures in these bags to prevent their fellows from stealing them. I also found a few cans of food, a five pound bag of rice, and packets of tea and sugar. In the bottom of one pack, I found a small bundle of greenish leaves, either oregano or marijuana, I deduced. Either way, I placed it in the keeper pile for now.

The bags also contained a few boxes of ammunition, but sadly, no 9mm. One nearly full fifty round box of 45 ACP, two fifty round boxes of 38 Special, and a twenty five round box of #4 buckshot in 12 gauge. Each bag also held a handful of loose rounds in the bottom. I did not take time to sort them. Instead they were added to a plastic bag I kept in one of the side pockets of my backpack. That was my odds and ends ammo collection. Even ammo for guns I didn't have held some trade value. Just as long as the person I traded it to didn't decide to use it on me.

Once I was done with the rough sorting, I set aside the largest and nicest of the bags and the only real backpack in the bunch. It was a black nylon North Face model with padded shoulder straps and a waist cinch, and I filled it with the "keeper" materials for hauling. That would be Amy's bag, and I made sure to include another pair of socks and some rags to stuff into the oversized boots. They might look like clown shoes, but I was betting she would wear them. Going barefoot was not an alternative.

I spent the next few minutes with an improvised cleaning kit going over the captured weapons as the light grew stronger in our little hide. For bandits and would-be rapists, the men I'd killed took very poor care of the tools of their trade.

I wanted to get moving before dawn but I decided Amy could use a few more minutes of sleep. When she finally opened her eyes, I saw confusion and fear warring on her expression as she took in her surroundings. Then those bright blue eyes caught mine, and she gave a little smile. No figuring girls, I thought as I tossed her the sweat pants and the socks. She caught the items of clothing and gave me a curious look.

"Go ahead and put those on. Roll up the legs on those sweats and cinch up the waist as best you can. Otherwise your butt is going to be hanging out," I said by way of explanation.

Amy looked at me with her head cocked to the right. In a second I could tell from her blush she remembered she was naked under the sweat shirt. She was covered to mid-thigh for the moment but that wouldn't do for any traveling. As the girl tried to figure out how to get the sweat pants on without exposing herself, I rose to a crouch and began easing myself out of the sheltered spot.

"Luke, where are you going?"

"Giving you a little privacy, and checking on breakfast." I didn't look back as I left. I felt a little uneasy leaving my gear and most of my newly acquired weapons with a near total stranger, but either she would work out or she wouldn't. Anyway, I had a good feeling about the girl.

Fifteen minutes later I was back in the little sheltered spot with a pair of rabbits tied to my belt and several thin metal cables rolled up to be returned to my pack. These rabbits might be kind of small, but I figured Amy would appreciate the fresh meat. Trying not to make it obvious, I noted the sweat pants fit, sort of, with the cuffs rolled up so the excess fabric did not drag the ground and the waist cinched in tight.

"I can build a fire if you want," Amy volunteered, eyeing the rabbits. A smile tugged at her lips, making me wonder how long it had been since that particular expression had crossed her pale features.

"Sure thing, but let's get moving first. We can stop in a little bit, cook these rabbits, and take a little time for ourselves. Maybe see if we can find you some better shoes, too."

Amy nodded her agreement and helped me finish picking up our little camp, which at this stage really just meant rolling up the blankets and my tarp. Once these items were secured, I eased out through the interlocking tree limbs and waited for the girl to follow. She seemed to be having some difficulty getting her pack to settle right but I knew she would eventually get used to the weight. I did.

"Where are we going?" Amy asked, still carefully picking her words.

"We'll follow this stream for a few miles then stop for a fire and roast these rabbits. In the meantime, have some of these," I said, and handed her a small can that used to contain baking soda.

They were wild blueberries. I picked them this morning and though not as sweet as store bought, Amy didn't seem to mind and ate half the can while we walked for the next hour. Our path paralleled a small stream that ran south and west, headed in my direction and the going was tough as the hills began to grow again. According to my map, we were nearly into Arkansas.

As if she could read my mind, Amy finally spoke.

"Where are we headed? I mean, do you have some place to go?"

Again, I could tell she was trying to choose her words with care and I realized she was trying to avoid provoking an angry response from me. She was rightfully

curious, but had been so conditioned to tread lightly that I had to wonder. How bad had her life been before I found her? This seemed more than one scary night's worth of caution, but what the heck did I know.

"Yeah, Amy, I've got a destination, and so do you if you decide to keep traveling with me. And you can always ask me questions, okay? I may not be able to answer you at the moment, but I will not ignore you. Or punish you."

After she gave me a small nod and a wary smile, I continued. Other than glancing over for a flash, I kept my eyes on the woods around us as I spoke.

"I'm headed home, eventually. Northeast Texas. My family has a farm outside a little town named Ripley. Ever heard of it?"

She shook her head so I continued.

"It's south of Tyler, close to Nacogdoches."

"Oh, Nacogdoches. That's SFA, right?"

"Yeah," I answered with a laugh.

With a reputation as a party school, Stephen F. Austin State University had name recognition well beyond its fifteen thousand student enrollment. Growing up twenty miles away, I had gotten accustomed to some of the nicer things the school had to offer, like being able to attend plays and visit an actual science lab that didn't look like something out of Dr. Frankenstein's basement. Being able to check out college girls didn't hurt either.

"That's a long ways. I think."

"Well, I started in Chicago, so I'm more than half way there by my calculations."

Amy gave a little squeal of surprise.

"All by yourself?"

I nodded, and then kept my silence for a few minutes as we navigated around some falling down barbed wire fencing. That gnarled mess appeared likely to give you tetanus from just looking at it. This patch of overgrown forest might have been a field at some point in the distant past, given the fencing and the immature trees sprouting all about, but that must have been years, or decades, ago. From my own hiking experience, this kind of terrain offered more hazards than timber company land, or even old growth forest. Only after we'd successfully navigated through the uneven ground did I pick up the thread of our conversation and continue.

"Traveling in large groups now just makes you a target. Unless you got a lot of firepower and people you can trust. So mainly I've come this far by myself."

While Amy digested this bit of information, I led her to a small side trail meandering down the hill and intersecting with the banks of a fast flowing creek. When I dropped my pack, Amy took that as a sign to follow suit. As she stood rubbing

her shoulders, I asked her to gather up small pieces of dry wood for a fire while I checked our water source.

The stream ran by us only a few feet from the trail, and I came to a halt by a small stand of cattails to look at the water. The flow appeared steady, maybe a little high on the banks from the recent rainfall, and likewise the load of sediment washed into the creek made the water a bit murky. Of course, eyeballing the water like this told me little, so I used my stainless steel pot to scoop up some of the liquid for further scrutiny.

No smell, and cleaner than I had first thought, enough so that we could get by without first pre-filtering. That would save us time and trouble, anyway. I worried about chemicals leeching into the water but since I couldn't do anything about that without running a complete condensation boiler operation, we would have to continue taking our chances. Heavy metals and PCB pollution had been a big problem even before the world came unhinged.

While Amy gathered sticks and small limbs for fuel, I carved up enough wood shavings to serve as tinder, then I used a gardening shovel normally strapped on the side my pack to gouge out a shallow depression in the dark, loamy soil. This would do in place of a fire ring and reduced the visible flicker of fire to anyone passing by our waystop. I placed the sticks and wood shavings in the pit in the approved Boy Scout manner and lit it using a Bic lighter.

Once I had the fire going, I fished out the wire frame stand I'd fabricated to fit the pot and put the water on to boil. While the pot was heating up, I stepped away from the creek side and quickly skinned the rabbits while Amy looked on curiously. She seemed to approve as I checked the flesh for lesions and the internal organs for signs of disease before discarding them, along with the skins, in the bushes. We wouldn't be here long enough to attract predators, I thought.

Using a pair of metal skewers, I set the two rabbits to roasting over the fire while boiling pot after pot of water to replenish our canteens and bottles, then on the last pot of water after the containers were topped off, I left Amy to watch the fire while I harvested some cattails and other forage greens I recognized near our little patch of forest. These greens went into the pot, as did one of the roasted rabbits. I let the stew simmer for a few more minutes while I retrieved the second rabbit and wrapped it in some sterilized aluminum foil scavenged some days ago.

"Why did you do that?" Amy asked, curious as my routine. I decided to give her some lessons while we waited for the rabbit to stew to finish.

"Okay, first of all, that is for lunch today. I use the foil to keep the bugs off it until we can eat it later. I cleaned up the aluminum the day before yesterday, setting it out over a fire for nearly an hour. Not enough to melt, but close. Hopefully that treatment will kill any germs on the foil.

"You saw how careful I was about the rabbits, right? Making sure they weren't infected or parasite-ridden. That is the way I try to do everything out here. Carefully.

You said before you could hunt, is that true?"

"Yeah. That's how I grew up. Daddy was a trucker but he couldn't find much work lately and Momma worked odd jobs when she could. Food prices got really bad there before the lights went out but fortunately we lived out in the country in a brokedown old trailer Daddy inherited. I killed plenty of squirrels and rabbits with my .22, and cleaned 'em just like you did."

I wanted to ask Amy how she came to be in her uncle's care but bit my tongue. Not my business, I decided. Maybe she will be able to trust me with the story later. I moved the conversation on to other topics.

"Well, we need to keep up the same concept of maintaining sanitation in everything we do. First and foremost, even more important than food, is clean drinking water. That's why I boiled the water before cooking, because if we had to drop everything at a moment's notice and haul ass, we filled our water requirements first. You can live for more than a week with no food, but no more than three days without water. That is the real deal."

Amy nodded. "My uncle, Daddy's brother, had some chlorine pills he used to purify the water but that stuff tasted horrible. He said you could boil the water but he didn't know how long and was afraid the creek water had bugs in it."

"I've got some bleach too, but boiling is usually enough. There's other ways of purifying water and there are some things like mercury and other poisons that even boiling or chlorine won't fix."

Pure bleach was a valuable barter commodity, and I salvaged it wherever I could. When money rapidly became worthless, many people realized that certain commodities represented other forms of wealth. A source of clean drinking water was worth more than gold or guns, which seemed to be the new currency, along with pussy and ammo.

To reinforce my point, I added a drop of chlorine solution to the cap threadings of each canteen and bottle while I stood explaining things to Amy. I talked about maintaining a low profile, avoiding other travelers, and why we moved before preparing a meal and why we would hit the road soon after as well. I could tell she got that part right off from her response.

"Yeah, people can smell food cooking a long ways off, even if they can't see your smoke. It's like our sense of smell got better all the sudden after the lights went out."

Yep. When you are so hungry your stomach thinks your throat has been cut, it is amazing how keen your nose can get in this new world.

By the time I finished treating the water containers, I could tell the small stew was simmering and ready. Using a pair of tongs, I pulled the pot and metal frame together away from the fire and gave the meal a few minutes to cool. Then I set about rifling my gear and I could tell Amy wanted to ask a question but she held her tongue.

Straightening from my pack, I pulled out a pair of spoons wrapped in plastic from the side pocket. She glanced at the one pot and the pair of spoons while I gave her a grin.

“Bon Appétit. You can go first.”

Amy dug into the soup with gusto but I noticed she was careful to save back at least half for me. I thanked her and ate my share quickly, eager to back on the move. Out here, staying in one spot too long was an invitation to get attacked. Once I was finished, I carried the bowl and spoons over to the creek, refilled the container with water, and set the rack back up over the flames.

This time I let the boil go on for a few minutes before using the tongs to pull the setup off the fire pit. Once the water cooled a bit, I tipped the small pot over and let the water drain out, then placed the spoons back in their plastic wrappers, careful where I placed my fingers on the hot metal to avoid contamination. Then I stowed the now cooled pot and wire rack back into their compartment in my pack.

Finally, I used a stick to drag some of the loose soil over from the small pile I'd made gouging out the hole and carefully smothered the fire. At this point, Amy spoke up, asking why I didn't use the water instead.

“I used that water to sterilize the pot and spoons, which is always a good idea. If I'd used the wash water to douse the fire, the heat might have been enough to convert some of that water to steam, like smoke. Since the fire was relatively smokeless, no sense in making a sign of our presence now.”

“How do you know all this stuff? Were you in the Army?”

I had to laugh at that, and once I saw the hurt look on Amy's face, I figured I needed to explain.

“Amy, how old do you think I am?”

She shrugged. “I don't know, like twenty five? Old,” she pronounced.

“Yeah, Amy, I am older than you. Sixteen years old, anyway. I wasn't laughing at you, just the idea that I am old enough to be a soldier, or that experienced.”

“Sixteen? That's just two years older than me. No way, Luke, you've got, like, lines on your face.”

I nodded, agreeing. “Living like this can surely age a person. Plus, not getting to shave regularly gives me this beard. I haven't looked in a mirror lately but I can bet I don't look the same at all.”

“I guess so. I don't know why you would lie about something like that. Did you have trouble at the beginning, with people thinking you were a kid? That they could take advantage of you?”

“Yeah.”

“What happened to them?”

When I didn't answer, and instead pulled my pack on, Amy got the message. Those three men she'd seen me kill were not the first. Jesus, nowhere near. I tried to keep a journal of sorts as I traveled, of what I had seen and where, but not a list of the men I had killed. Sometimes I saw them in my dreams, but not so often any more. Even after just two months of living in this shit, I'd already learned to process a lot and just let it go.

I hoped Amy would learn how to do the same. We had a lot of miles to cover in the meantime.

CHAPTER THREE

Amy and I continued our trek south for nearly a week, following the shallow little creek as it meandered eventually into a swift moving river. Along the way, we kept our eyes open for any chance to liberate her better footwear and other essentials. Nothing fruitful came along until shortly after we turned slightly west to parallel the river. Then we got lucky.

Amy spotted it first, a partially burned two story farmhouse set back in the trees. With only a long driveway leading out to a narrow dirt road, this location appeared fairly isolated. And yet as we drew nearer, I could see the windblown trash in the front yard and the glint of broken glass told me even out here, looters had struck.

"Think we should look?" Amy asked a touch apprehensive. She was still having trouble getting comfortable with salvaging versus looting, at least how I defined the terms. "Looting" meant taking from someone either still in residence or likely to return. So, I had no problem with people shooting looters.

Salvage, on the other hand, is the repurposing of abandoned or lost items for your own use. If someone was still residing in that house or if I found any sign that indicated the people who lived there might be coming back, we would pass it up. Unless we were starving, and then all bets are off. I kept this caveat to myself, not wanting to alarm Amy, but it is a hard, cruel world we live in these days.

However, a quick solo reconnaissance of the house and surrounding out buildings showed the property to be abandoned. I found no bodies or sign of struggle, just broken dishes and paper trash scattered everywhere. The kitchen in particular looked to have been attacked with a baseball bat or something similar since all of the glassware looked shattered and most of the metal cooking pots appeared caved in with dents. Someone, or several someone's, must have found the cupboard to be empty and taken offense.

"Looks clear," I told Amy once I found her hiding spot in the barn. She was getting better at picking good, unexpected places to conceal herself. This time she used a pair of empty fifty five gallon drums to cover her in front while laying a tattered old horse blanket over the top. I could tell from the dust on the concrete floor that this time she had not moved the drums, a move that gave her position away before when we played this game.

"See anything good?" She asked, dusting her hands off on a shop towel she found in the barn.

"That towel for starters," I said then continued. "The homeowners had at least one daughter still living at home. Her room is at the top of the stairs on the left, so you might want to look there first. I didn't check anything yet, just made sure we don't have any surprises. You know how I hate those."

"Yep. Your parents must have hated trying to buy presents for you."

Fortunately for us, the fire failed to catch more than the curtains and carpet on fire in places so other than a little smoke damage and busted out windows, much of

the house looked intact. From water stains I saw in the smoke trails leading up the walls, I wondered if the looters had tried to set the house on fire in the rain.

While Amy was occupied upstairs, I headed back to the kitchen to nose around a little more while also keeping my ears cocked for any sounds not coming from upstairs. With Amy along for the time being, I wanted to add to our meal prep items and in short order I located a frying pan, a stainless steel stock pot and a set of salt and pepper shakers shaped like a pair of duck decoys. The pepper shaker was only half full but the salt shaker looked completely full, so I used some tape to cover the tops of both. Pepper is nice to have but salt is a necessity.

After I found the kitchen's junk drawer I felt like doing a little happy dance. The looters, so fixated on food, overlooked a treasure trove of Bic lighters, LED flashlights, and a number of rolls of wire. The wire stumped me until I saw all the screws and realized they were for hanging pictures. I was thinking more along the lines of additional rabbit snares. Maybe a garrote, if I could find the right gauge wire. I'd read how to fashion a garrote in one of my father's survival books but never tried to make one.

After a half hour of adding to my already bulging pack, I heard unfamiliar steps coming down the stairs and spun hard, my hand on my pistol, to find Amy transformed. Gone were the filthy jersey, baggy sweat pants and the grime darkened CASE tractor cap I had loaned her. These ragged items were replaced with snug fitting jeans and a flowery pick tank top that hinted at more cleavage than I knew she had. Even the nearly new tan hiking boots she now wore looked to be in good shape. She was so happy these boots fit, even though they were a half size larger than she normally wore.

Somewhere, she had also managed to clean up and then I could make out the faint floral scent. Baby wipes, I thought. For the first time I really got a chance to see Amy with a clean face and with her shoulder length blonde hair brushed out, she looked good. And cute. Okay, she was more than cute. Looking like she did, Amy was a full on teenaged boy's fantasy girl. We would need to talk about that fact. Carefully. Just not right now.

Now, I didn't know a lot about girls before the lights went out, and the last six days spent with Amy had done little to expand my knowledge base. However, from tidbits Amy let slip I managed to figure out that her uncle was a last chance refuge for her, after her parents had somehow managed to get themselves dead. The thing is, I think what almost happened with those three dirt bags I killed might have happened before, with her uncle renting her out. So, from what little psychology I knew, Amy was probably suffering from poor self esteem on top of the PTSD, survivor's guilt and whatever other crazy we all carried around with us.

So, I wouldn't judge Amy and I sure as hell didn't blame her for getting sold off by her monster of an uncle. I figured her ego could use a little stroking at this point, and I was willing to provide that praise.

“Wow, Amy, you look great. Glad to see some of the clothes made it through the fire okay.”

Amy rewarded me with a big, toothy grin that looked real for once, and I had to match it with a smile of my own in response.

“Oh, yeah. There’s some things clearly missing from the closet but still I have some clothes to choose from. And they even fit me.”

“You have a chance to check the other closets yet? I’m starting to run low on clothes myself.”

Amy gave a shy little giggle before replying.

“Sorry, this guy was short and chunky. 30 inch length with a 44 inch waist on most of the pants I saw.”

I sighed theatrically at the news but I figured as much from the few remaining family pictures I saw around the house. At nearly three inches over six feet, I was tall for sixteen and I used to be big through the shoulders and arms from farm labor and working out. Since the lights went out, I’d leaned down so much my body carried little excess. Just about all muscle and bone these days. Under one hundred sixty pounds if that mechanical bathroom scale I’d tried the other day was close to accurate. I feared I might be even lighter than that, the way my ribs showed. I was concerned, but would not let Amy know for the time being.

“Well, did they at least leave any socks? What about shirts and underwear?”

I ended up taking three shirts, all of the remaining athletic socks remaining in the drawer, and two almost new pairs of black boxer briefs. Despite everything, I still felt a little weird wearing some stranger’s underwear, but reasoned that it beat continuing to go commando. I wanted to ask Amy if she felt the same way, but then came to my senses at the last minute and kept my mouth shut.

Selecting one of the denim work shirts, I headed into the master bathroom to change and decided to nose around for supplies while I was in there. The medicine cabinet had been cleaned out but in the small towel closet I found a stash of hotel soaps, shampoo bottles and even a compact sewing kit. These looked like souvenirs as they all bore the logos of high end hotels. Under this treasure trove I also discovered two boxes of maxipads and I felt my face redden as I scooped them out as well. I figured Amy would appreciate them at some point, if I could muster up the courage to give them to her.

“What do you think happened to them?”

I turned and gave Amy a fake frown of disapproval as she entered unannounced.

“Uh, excuse me miss, I’m dressing here.”

“No, you are not,” Amy replied with a little giggle, “you are salvaging. And you have all your clothes on.”

“Yeah but I might have been naked.”

“Nah, I knew you weren’t. I peeked.”

I felt my face flush a bit. This was getting into unfamiliar, uncomfortable, territory again.

“Well, anyway, I have some stuff here to go in the take pile. Soap and shampoo and...” I paused, and Amy quickly filled in the silence.

“Oh, did you get those pads for me? Thank you.” Then she waited a beat before continuing. “I want to put them in my pack but I’m not sure there would be room. Will you be a gentleman and carry them for me?”

Amy’s voice was so sappy sweet that I immediately smelled a rat.

“Bullshit. You set me up to find those, didn’t you? You knew I would search the closet like I always do.”

Amy grinned again, answering my question before she spoke a word.

“Yeah, guilty. I just wanted to see what you would do. A test, and you passed. Hooray.” Amy smiled again and then a shadow seemed to pass over her thoughts. I could tell she had grown serious again.

“What do you think happened here? Did this family make it out alive? I know you can tell, Luke.”

I nodded. “Looks like they did. Of course, no bodies so that is a good sign. Also, I suspect they had transportation that still ran. My guess would be an old diesel truck based on the tools and parts I saw in the garage. They left, bugged out, and some time later a group of looters showed up and pulled the arson after stealing the obvious stuff.”

“I hope they made it somewhere safe with their kids. From the pictures, this family looked really nice.”

I noted her use of the past tense. They might have been really nice before, and the family might still live, but these days just about nobody could afford to be “really nice” lest it cost them their life. I didn’t want to debate the topic with Amy though, especially since I figured if a family went to the expense and time to frame and hang family pictures, they darn well better look nice and homey. Who wants to see Pops sitting with his muddy rubber boots propped up on the coffee table or a snapshot of Mom chugging the cooking sherry? Not me.

Thinking about these missing folks got me thinking about my own family. My parents, freaks that they are, really seem to like each other. Always holding hands and kissing like a pair of newlyweds. I made a point of always thinking of my parents in the present tense, rather than in the past, because in my mind they are still alive. That is all I’ve got to hang on to right now. They are alive and waiting for me to show up.

After we finished collecting our salvage, I led Amy back around to the barn and we set up camp. The family that had once lived here, the Turners, had kept horses at some point. None remained, but the six horse stalls lining the east side of the barn made for some cozy little rooms.

"No fire tonight?" Amy asked as she arranged the armload of horse blankets into somewhat comfortable mats. This was the same question she asked every afternoon or evening as we prepared for the night.

"Sorry, not tonight," I replied just like I did every evening. A fire at night, or even the smell of smoke, was a beacon to our location. We continued to cook in the morning or at mid day, but still only if we were going to immediately leave the area. Winter would be a different story but we were still in the midst of summer and the nightly drop in temperature was a welcomed relief from the heat.

I understood Amy's desire. A campfire was comforting, but I would not take the risk. Instead, I used the fading light to work with Amy on the care and use of our weapons. Having my little friend comfortable with firearms larger than a .22 rifle would go a lot further in insuring my peace of mind.

My effort teaching Amy about our new weapons was not exactly the blind leading the blind. My father had drummed the basics of firearm safety into my head from an early age and by the time the lights went out, I had gotten to be a decent shot with rifle and shotgun. Okay, more than decent.

I also knew my way around pistols, and I tried to impart those lessons to Amy. Every day we spent a few minutes drilling on fundamentals using one of the weapons in our little arsenal. Today, I used the Ruger P95 as a teaching tool to familiarize Amy with the way a semiautomatic pistol operates, and fails. Like me, Amy had grown up hunting but she had no experience at all with handguns or larger caliber rifles. Thinking about bagging small game reminded me to go set my wire snares, so I asked Amy to go through the ammo "grab bag" to sort out any 9mm rounds for me while I went out for a few minutes to place my traps. I should have either done this myself days ago or asked Amy for her help sooner. Having another set of willing hands was still something I needed to remember.

"Any luck?" I asked Amy upon slipping back into the little nest we had built. She held up six rounds in the palm of her hand, the brass just visible in the fading light. Though I'd hoped for more, every little bit helped.

"Cool. That will help. Thank you." I accepted the offering and gestured for the girl to join me at a seat closer to the door to catch the sun's dying rays. I set out the handguns salvaged from the three dead men, and after ensuring all were unloaded, I coached Amy on handling them. One of the revolvers was a nine shot model in 22LR made by a company I'd never heard of, High Standard, which appeared to be in good shape despite its age. The 22 Long Rifle cartridge was not an intimidating caliber, but for a skinny girl like Amy the High Standard worked as a nice starter sidearm. In fact, she had been carrying the long barreled revolver for the last few days in the Western style holster that came with the weapon. Once she grew more comfortable, I would

see about either switching her over to the other revolver, a Dan Wesson Model 15 in .357 Magnum, or my own Ruger P95.

She picked up the Glock 21 and I encouraged her to handle the pistol but I quickly explained that the Glock was shortly going to be my new sidearm.

“But, the other pistol, that is your gun, right? I mean, that one has gotten you this far, why switch?” Amy asked, not concerned but surely puzzled.

I nodded, acknowledging the point. “That Ruger is a fine pistol, but I’ve only got thirty six rounds for it, counting what you just gave me, and one magazine. I’ve got a lot more 45ACP, which the Glock uses, and three spare magazines. If it shoots even halfway decent, I will go with the new pistol. I’m not going to throw away the Ruger, Amy. I’ll find room for it in my pack.”

The lever action rifle was a decent find, a Rossi M92 in .357 Magnum, which meant it used the same caliber as the Dan Wesson revolver. I had a lever action rifle at home, a Marlin 30-30, but this rifle was shorter and lighter as well as featuring only the iron sights it came with. I at least knew the sights were still true; having dared a trio of shots earlier in the week and found the rifle gave us a little bit more range in our defense. Maybe out to one hundred yards, if push came to shove. The shots I took at fifty yards grouped a few inches to left of the makeshift bullseye, a leaky plastic bucket I hung from a tree and dabbed with mud. I would have preferred my Marlin or even the old Mosin Nagant M44 carbine my dad let me plink with, but salvagers take what they can get.

The shotgun, on the other hand, turned out to be better than expected. The Mossberg 500 indeed boasted an extended tube as well as ghost ring sights and a sidesaddle rig to hold an additional 5 spare shells. I’d used this style of shotgun before and I knew it was absolutely devastating with buckshot out to thirty yards and maybe double that with the right slugs. Amy carried the shotgun for me but I wasn’t sure she was up to the recoil except in an emergency. Of course, everything out here was pretty much an emergency, all the time.

When I made that observation out load, Amy chuckled a little bit.

“Well, at least we ain’t stuck walking in the rain. Got a roof over our head tonight and nobody chasing us? That is cause for celebration.”

I thought about Amy’s words and smiled. She’d said a lot without even realizing it. With that, I opened our mess kits while Amy retrieved our dinner, a plastic sack containing two roasted squirrels left from lunch. Not exactly fancy cuisine, but it was food. I figured a lot of folks were going to bed hungry that night, so I was happy to be eating my dinner.

Later, after we settled down in our bedrolls, I let Amy snuggle up next to me and lay quiet in the dark, listening. I heard all the common night sounds, like owls hooting and coyotes barking. I heard the wind in the grass, and the rumble of distant thunder. But, I never heard an engine, or any other sign that man still roamed the

world. I knew they were out there, my fellow survivors, but that absence of man-made sound still weighed heavily on me. I was a long time getting to sleep.

CHAPTER FOUR

After a quick breakfast of honeyed rice and shredded rabbit meat the next morning, I hauled out our maps and began to plot the next leg of our journey. The rice had been cooked the day before but still tasted fine. I really wish we could start heating our meals onsite but my father's admonitions about cooking smells stuck with me.

He'd served two tours in Iraq early on in the war, back before I could even remember him being gone, and he'd talked many times about his men finding the insurgents by following their noses. That didn't work in the towns, but out in the wadis and rural settings, the smell of cooking could be followed for quite a ways.

Amy had seen the maps before but this was her first chance to take a closer look at the unfolded pages. Some came from actual gas station maps while others were atlas pages I'd cut out. Everywhere I'd been, dots and annotations could be seen spread about the route. I never offered to explain what the dots and cryptic notes meant and Amy never asked.

"Wow" she breathed, "that's a lot of miles. And look, I can't believe we're already in Arkansas. I guess I missed the road sign."

That was our little joke, since we avoided built up areas and roads wherever possible. I didn't have to tell Amy that bad things happened when you get people concentrated. The major highways were bad enough, but even small towns needed to be skirted. The big cities, well, I'd told Amy some of my experiences leaving Chicago and trying to work my way around St. Louis. I'd left out most of the worst parts of those stories, but what I had shared made her understand. Going into the big cities meant killing, or being killed.

Now, Amy and I had a decision to make. West to Oklahoma, or further south into Arkansas? Those were the two options, and Amy grasped the pros and cons very quickly. West would add more miles to the trip, but offered a smoother passage. South, deeper in the Ozark Mountains, meant rougher terrain and what looked like more serious rivers that would need to be somehow forded.

"West," Amy finally said, giving me a shy smile as she spoke.

“Yeah, that’s what I think too. Let’s finished getting geared up and hit the road.”

“You mean the trees, right? We haven’t seen a blacktop road in a while.”

I was gladdened by Amy’s banter as we tooled up and made for the fence line around the isolated property. A week ago, Amy was a terrified little girl, and now she could look me in the eye and not flinch. She could joke with me and not worry I was going to backhand her into a wall.

Now she was wearing the little chrome High Standard revolver and walked with the lever action rifle slung over her shoulder. Amy also wore one of the fixed blade sheath knives on her left hip, and at first glance she looked a little like a badass. She was still scared, and made no bones about admitting that to me, but now at least she felt like she was allowed to fight back if necessary. I assured her our default setting for confrontation was to run away if we possibly could. We had no desire to get into a shootout with anybody. I noticed Amy had gone back to wearing her hair up under the ballcap once again to obscure her gender.

One of my maps had shown a small gravel county road only two miles from the Turner place that would run southwest in a fairly straight line towards Oklahoma, so we struck out in that direction and made good time crossing the scrubby landscape. Amy saw it before I did, a narrow rocky track running up and down rather than through the countryside. The maps referred to this part of northern Arkansas as being on the edge of the Interior Highlands. I took that to mean hills, because we sure crossed a lot of them as we walked parallel to the minor road. We also waded a few creeks and filtered enough water to keep our containers filled.

By noon we had covered about eight miles but had to slow our pace as we started seeing more houses in the distance and increased signs of activity. I pushed us out beyond the hundred yards to five hundred yards from the road to give us better separation. As we neared what looked to be an intersection, I left Amy to watch our bags in a copse of trees and crept up closer to see what I could make out. I carried the Mossberg shotgun and hoped to avoid using it since all I wanted was information.

Half an hour later I rejoined Amy and took a long drink from my water bottle before spilling the beans.

“Four miles to Harrison, just like you figured,” I told Amy.

“What do we do?”

Harrison, while not a big city, had a pre-Event population of around 12,000 according to the atlas we were using. Amy and I had bypassed several tiny villages in our travels together but this was her first time having to skirt a larger town. I was proud to see she wasn’t visibly frightened, just wanting to know the drill.

“We’ll start circling south once we hit that next stand of trees. Just take it slow and easy, and stay close to the ground. If you hear shots, do like I told you.”

My instructions for Amy, if she started taking fire, was to stop, drop, and roll. She gave me an uneasy grin as I recited those familiar words. Find cover and stay down. We hadn't had time to do much in the way of tactical training for Amy, but then what the heck did I know anyway? Just some stuff my father taught me and things I'd read in books.

On the other hand, I was still alive when a lot of other folks weren't, so that had to count for something. Some of those dead men were soldiers, and I still somehow managed to put down a few of them. I never shared that story with Amy, for a couple of reasons, but I still had nightmares even a month later.

This close to town, stopping for a meal would be unwise so Amy and I made do with some stale crackers and washed them down with the ever-present warm bottles of water. Not very filling and bland, but neither of us complained. We'd both missed enough meals so that actually having something in our bellies beat the alternative.

As the day wore on, I kept us angled even further to the south as we kept bumping into more homesteads. This slowed our progress but Amy agreed that we did not want to accidentally run into anyone out here. Any homeowners who saw the pair of us might shoot first, without question.

That thought barely had time to settle in my brain before I heard the shooting start up. I hit the ground without ceremony and glanced to my side. There was Amy, sprawled out on her belly trying to look inconspicuous. The shots weren't incoming, but closer than I liked. By the sounds of reports, I gauged this was two or more rifles. Trying to guess the location of the shooters and their targets while cowering in the grass was harder than they made it look on TV.

"You alright?" I asked.

"Yeah, I'm okay. I..I think I peed my pants a little," Amy replied.

"Me too. Don't sweat it."

Other than the tall grass, we didn't have much working for us in the way of concealment. Despite our best efforts, sometimes there wasn't any choice but to cross these fields and try to stay low. The closest cover I could see without "prairie dogging" it was roughly thirty yards to our left, and it was only a pair of straggly crepe myrtle bushes. Really, not much cover at all. Still, small limbs beat blades of grass, so I oriented my body in that direction.

"Amy, we are going to crawl over there," I gestured slightly with my head, nodding. "Elbows and toes, and keep your butt down. Take your time. I don't think the shooters have even noticed us, so let's keep it that way. You good to go?"

With her grunt of a response, I started off, cradling the shotgun in my arms like an ugly baby as I drug my body forward on protesting elbows. The urge was there to use my knees, but I knew that doing so would lift my rear in the air, exposing not only my backpack but my rear to scrutiny. This was something my father taught me, a skill

he'd learned in training and used in wartime. I hoped I was doing it correctly, but I feared a bullet would let me know if I failed.

Once we gained the dubious cover of the bushes, which were on a slight rise, I could finally understand what I was hearing. Raising my binoculars cautiously, I made out the drama unfolding just a few hundred yards away.

The house looked rundown and uninviting; a brick faced ranch style lacking even the hint of a porch or any decorative touches in front. Just a front door, wooden and sun faded, flanked by a pair of windows, and cement steps leading up from the graveled driveway. Out front, I could just make out three men hunkered down, rifles in hand, crouched behind a rusty old King Cab pickup. From my position, offset to the left, I watched the men take turns leaning out from behind cover of the truck to take shots at the house. Whoever was in the house did not waste shots returning fire, but with my binoculars I thought I saw a rifle barrel through one of the windows.

They did not seem to be in a hurry, and I wondered at their plan. Either the three would try to wait out the people in the house, keeping the house under siege, or they had others in their party working their way around to flank the defenders. Or something else entirely was going on, and I couldn't see it from my vantage point.

Whatever the case, none of this was any of my business. Glancing over at Amy, I shook my head and eased back from the vantage point, slow and easy. No need to attract attention with quick movements, and this was something Amy and I could just crawl away from and get back on track. Bad things were going to happen at that house, and I felt sympathy for whoever might be trapped inside, but none of it was my doing or responsibility. Heck, maybe that was the local militia and the people trapped inside might be outlaws, I tried to tell myself.

I would not risk Amy's life, or my own, for that of a stranger. I hated to make the call but I was outnumbered here, and outgunned. I couldn't exactly see what they were using, but it sounded a heck of a lot more powerful than a lever action rifle shooting pistol rounds.

Then the baby started crying. The sound was faint across the distance, but I could tell it was coming from inside the besieged house. I felt a small hand latch on to my pants leg.

"We have to help them." It was a statement, not a question. Her voice came out in a hiss, nearly vibrating with tension.

"There's too many." I replied. "Plus, they have real rifles, not like that little popgun. We don't even know what's going on, and I just can't risk it."

"I'll help, Luke. You know I can shoot." Amy pleaded.

I shook my head, glancing back at her face, now red with exertion and tension. Maybe anger as well. She had come a long way in just a short time from the frightened little girl I first met in that terrible bedroom.

“Amy, honey, I know you might want to help. And if we could do something, we would. We don’t have anything with the range here to make a difference. Neither that rifle nor this shotgun has the range to take them on without just getting too close to them. You can take pot shots all day with that pistol, but you might as well be shooting straight up for all the good...”

That stopped me in midsentence as an idea suddenly came to mind. Maybe we could do something to even the odds, and Amy could do her part to help, if she was willing.

I quickly sketched out the framework of a plan and of course the girl agreed to do her part. Now I just needed to make this scheme work without getting us both killed.

As I crept back with Amy in tow, I saw where I could place Amy, and a trail that might take me where I needed to go. That baby never did stop crying as I ghosted off into the treeline skirting the little homestead, reminding me the clock was already ticking.

CHAPTER FIVE

At the first crack of the little pistol, I dropped my head and waited while Amy slowly emptied the cylinder. On the third shot, I looked up to see all three of the home invaders turning their attention to the north. Since I'd moved in a semi circle around the trees bordering the yard, I was slightly behind the three men sheltering near the truck.

As a bonus, I now finally managed to make out what I presumed was the fourth member of their little team. He was low crawling through the scrubby grass of the back yard, and doing a poor job of it given how much of his body he left exposed. Four bad guys at least, maybe more if they had posted an overwatch, and I knew this was a bad idea. But, it was better than letting Amy get herself shot, I told myself.

With no time to dawdle, I lined up my first shot and gently squeezed the trigger. I was in a semi prone position, belly down but with my upper body raised just enough to work the lever. The first raider went down with a bullet in his side, the round catching him right in the armpit at the edge of what I took to be a magazine carrier rig. I was a little over forty yards away and the 38 Special was not an especially potent caliber but the man still went down with a scream.

I worked the lever action, barrel drifting to the side a bit as I fired again, this time my bullet catching the second raider with a hit to his left arm. Solid, but not a killing wound. I worked the lever again, and pushed myself into a roll that moved me about three feet from my previous spot.

Centering on the wounded raider, I went for a head shot and saw blood spray. I was a little low, but the bullet seemed to carve a tunnel in the man's neck, blasting out. I levered the action, lining up for the third raider, when an incoming round struck the ground inches from my face with a chilling crack. Crap, I thought. The backyard sneak was zeroing in on me.

I rolled again, this time at an angle to gain more separation from the shooter. I dared not pause to even look up until I was crouched down behind a nearby tree trunk. I took a quick peek and dropped flat on my belly. The good news was both the raiders I shot appeared to be down for good, but unfortunately, I now had two more angry, rifle wielding thugs gunning for me. And they had me caught in a crossfire unless I bailed quick.

Deciding a retreat was in order, I began to crawl away even as high caliber bullets began to rain down around me. I was outnumbered and outgunned, and I needed to get out of here. I could hear yelling but the words sounded failed to make an impression except that I thought they were advancing on me in a leapfrog fashion.

Crap. That meant they probably knew what they are doing. One would fire and the other would dash forward ten or twelve yards, then drop. By alternating this pattern, one would be shooting while the other covered the distance. Soon they would have me.

The grass was tall enough to give some cover but I feared once they got closer they would be able to catch the ripple of my movement in the sea of green. Pausing to take stock, I realized there was really no other option except to hold and fight. No way would I retreat back to Amy, not while these men lived. After saving her, I could not risk her life that way.

With one on the right and the other my left, I waited for the left hand attacker to jump up, then shot him center mass. As my barrel skewed right I knew I would be too late, but still worked the lever frantically and squeezed the trigger. I couldn't see the last raider's face, but the man's rifle was already coming to bear on me from barely twenty yards away. Before his barrel completed that arc, I heard another shot. Then a second, and what sounded like a shuddering sigh.

Not hesitating for a second, I squeezed the trigger as soon as I had a sight picture, then fired twice more before going back to the first flanker and drilling a bullet into the top of his exposed head. He might have been dead, or wounded, but that insurance shot made sure short of the Second Coming, he wasn't getting up.

How long I lay there, dazed by the insanity of those few mad minutes, I could never recall. I was alive, and I didn't expect to be. The next thing I knew, I heard a familiar voice calling out to me.

"Luke! Luke! Are you okay?" Amy cried from some distance away.

Not wanting to give away my position, I had no choice now that Amy was announcing her presence to the world. Muttering under my breath, I finally replied.

"I'm fine. Calm down. Stay where you are and don't say anything else." I called out. "Stay still and I will come to you."

Sitting there, I realized the tubular magazine on the little rifle was almost empty and I started feeding spare rounds into the loading gate. By the time I was done, the shaking in my hands had nearly stopped. I felt tired and shaky from the adrenaline dump, but still forced my legs to work as I low crawled over to a fallen tree limb that offered some minimal cover.

Daring to peek around at my surroundings, I saw several shapes that had once been men, but none of them were now moving. Three by the truck, including the man who should have killed me and a fourth corpse lying sprawled in the overgrown back yard. Nothing was moving, and the quiet was stifling after the barrage of gunfire.

"Hey, mister, you okay?"

The voice surprised me, but after a second I realized it was coming from the house. I looked closely at the front window I could see clearly, but no one was foolish enough to silhouette themselves. I thought about not answering, but I didn't want the

people in that house getting antsy now that the fighting was done. Or, at least, done as far as I was concerned.

“Yeah, I’m good. Thanks for getting that last one. I just wasn’t fast enough.”

“No problem. It was my pleasure, believe me. He was so focused on you he must of forgot I was here and armed too. Are you one of Dwight’s men?” The man had a deep, husky voice that sounded friendly enough, all things considered.

“No sir. I don’t know any Dwight. My friend and I were just passing by and heard the shooting. And then the baby started crying. We didn’t know what was going on here, but anybody shooting into a house with a baby in it must be on the wrong side of things.”

The pause that followed stretched on for over a minute before the man spoke again.

“We thank you for the help. You could have just kept on going and no one would have known you were there,” he said.

I decided to avoid mentioning my conversation with Amy suggesting we do that very thing. She was right because somehow we both managed to survive. There is a reason I try to hold to my rule of not taking on groups of more than three. The odds just don’t work out.

“We would have known it, sir. A man’s gotta be able to sleep at night with what he’s done, or not done.”

“Well, call your friend. Both of you are welcome to join us for lunch. We don’t have much but under the circumstances, how can we not share?” The man’s voice was softer now, and seemed to ring with sincerity. I decided to discuss the proposal with Amy first, so I called her to me by way of answering the man’s offer.

In a few minutes, I made out the shape of my travelling companion creeping through the tall grass and making her way to where I had initially set up. I was impressed at how smoothly, and quietly, she worked her way across the terrain. Amy carried the shotgun with a competent, confident grip, barrel down but ready for use at a moment’s notice.

I motioned her over to my new position and she reacted quickly, hustling over and taking a knee as she brought the shotgun to her shoulder, scanning her surroundings. I was so proud of her progress.

“Are we going in there?” she asked softly.

“We don’t have to if you don’t want. You know how I am, all ‘Stranger Danger’ about everybody we see. What do you say?”

Amy gave me a crooked grin. “Hey, sometimes you just have to take a chance on people. Look what you did for me.”

I had to bite my lip to keep from laughing.

"I don't know, Amy. I think the jury is still out on that one."

"Bite me, Luke. Just bite me."

With that, I couldn't hold back the laughter another second.

CHAPTER SIX

Stan and Ruth Schecter, and their six month old daughter Sophia, had only been taking shelter in the abandoned house for the last two days. They'd needed the refuge after Stan, a short but powerfully built guy with hands like hammers, had sprained an ankle on a gopher hole. Or armadillo hole, he said. Either way, he was slowing them down and Ruth insisted they needed to fort up somewhere to let the swelling go down.

We learned all this while sitting around the dining room table in the dim little house, eating a potluck meal of soup made from the contents of all our bags. Ruth

seemed extremely pleased by the cup of rice and the freshly cut cattail roots I'd produced from my backpack, but she seemed to be watching me closely.

"Sophia loves rice," she'd finally said when I asked.

Then the five of us ate in relative silence, the only interruptions coming from the baby as she periodically babbled her approval. I didn't know much about babies, since my only sibling was a sister over two years my junior. The earliest I could recall was seeing her as a little girl, but not as a toddler or younger.

In any case, Sophia seemed to be a very well behaved baby, her earlier shrieks notwithstanding. Heck, I wanted to cry too the first time somebody started shooting at me. When I chuckled under my breath at that thought, Amy gave me a curious look and asked if I had anything to share with the class. When I explained, Stan and Ruth just shook their heads at the idea but couldn't deny the truth of my statement, either. Amy laughed, of course.

Once the last of the broth was gulped down, Ruth and Amy volunteered to clean up the dishes using a bucket of water from the kitchen. Ruth explained that she'd filled the bucket last night from a stream running along the other side of the house near the driveway. This was their only water source and though not fit for drinking, it could be boiled on their camp stove. This left me to keep Stan company as he sat rocking the suddenly sleepy Sophia.

"She looks so happy," I said, noting the contented smile turning up the corners of the little girl's lips.

"Got any of your own waiting for you back home?" Stan asked, turning carefully in his seat while trying not to jar the foot he kept elevated on a stack of cardboard boxes. Despite his stocky shape, Stan had a gaunt, hollow cheeked appearance that looked recent, marking him as another adherent to the Apocalypse Diet. I imagined any extra food he had or found went to keeping his wife and daughter fed. He seemed like that kind of guy.

"No sir, nothing like that."

"Well, now's probably not the best time, but having kids will surely change your perspective on what is important."

I nodded. "The road is certainly no place for a little angel like her, but you already knew that, right?"

"Yeah," Stan agreed, "but the choice wasn't left up to us. When the gang stormed our subdivision, we barely got out with our lives. Oh, we tried to fight them, me and all the neighbors still around, but they had the numbers. We killed a mess of them, but for every one I shot seemed like there was two more to take their place."

"Gangs can be really bad news. I've seen some of them set up on the roads, calling themselves toll collectors, but they're just bandits."

“Well, Ruth was smart enough to make me stash a little bit in the woods, just what you see here with us, but without these supplies we’d already be in trouble. I thought it would be enough to walk to Ruth’s folks’ place, but this bum ankle has slowed us down.”

“How much farther do you have to go?”

“Just to outside of Siloam Springs is all. Ruth’s family has a nice little setup there and a tight group of neighbors. They’ll be fine. So will we, when we get there.”

The man paused, seeming to pick his words as he continued.

“I think you and Amy might be welcomed there too. Not for me to say for sure, but you sure pulled our fat out of the fire this morning. Those guys were pretty well set up out front, so I couldn’t get a clear shot, and the first thing they did when they pulled up was threaten to burn the house down if we didn’t come out.”

“Stan, I appreciate the thought. Maybe we can travel together at least as far as your destination. There is strength in numbers on the road, as long as you can trust who is watching your back.”

“You two been traveling long?” Stan asked, and I could tell he’d waited until the ladies were out of the room to pose the question.

“Me? Since about a week after the lights went out. Freakin’ chaperone made me stay at the hotel six days. Waiting for the lights to come back on, when we should have been already on the road. I knew the power was gone when I heard the transformers blowing, but he was convinced the government was going to get things fixed.”

“Wait...what? Chaperone?”

I nodded. “I was in Chicago for a national science competition through my school when the lights went out. Mr. Setzer was there because he was my science teacher.”

“How old are you?”

I had to laugh. “Sixteen.”

“But, you killed those men, like, like it was nothing. And Amy...”

“Mr. Schechter, I may be a kid but the world’s changed. Adapt or die, and I am too young and handsome to go down yet. Yes, I’ve killed before, but only to defend myself or others.” I paused, and I noticed my tone of voice changed when I continued despite my conscious effort to remain unaffected.

“Amy is fourteen, and we met under similar circumstances. Not my story to tell, but she has seen a lot of pain in her life, and I don’t think that started when the lights went out. I will not take advantage of her, Mr. Schechter, and I’ll kill anybody who tries. We might sleep next to each other, but that’s it.”

Stan held up those large hands, palm out. I could tell he was a good man. I knew this by the way Ruth and little Sophia acted around him. Oh, Stan could do the hard things if he needed to, since he and his family were still alive, but he took no joy in killing. He'd saved my life after all, taking out that fourth bandit that had me in his sights. He face was serious as he replied.

"Man, we are cool, and please, you can still call me Stan. You just look older and, well, Ruth was worried about Amy is all, traveling with an older guy. I've seen how it is out on the road, and you are right. No place for someone you care for out there."

I agreed. We spoke for a few more minutes as we discussed what little we knew about why the power suddenly went out. Neither of us had heard any type of official government announcement, and Stan was leaning towards some type of Coronal Mass Ejection, or CME. I agreed it was possible, but wondered aloud why the news didn't carry any mention of it beforehand.

"What do you mean? Somebody would have seen this coming?" Stan asked, wide-eyed.

"Yes, if it was a CME, we should have gotten twelve to twenty four hours advanced notice. We have observatories watching the sun for these, and their feeds and updates are publically available. If something like that was coming, my dad would have called or texted me with a warning if nothing else."

"So what do you think caused it? If it was an EMP, I figure it would have been in advance of some type of attack, but so far we've heard nothing." Stan sounded suddenly concerned, like someone whose world had just been upset yet again.

I shrugged.

"CME or EMP, one or the other, or maybe it was something else entirely. Polar shift upsetting the magnetic fields of the earth? I read a book about that once. The author theorized the resulting changes might fry the electrical grid at least, but I could tell he was just making stuff up."

I kept quiet about what I'd heard from the National Guard troops I'd encountered. They thought it was in preparation of an invasion of some sort, but they were also nuts. Mentioning their opinions would raise more questions than I wanted to answer at this point.

"So how do you know all this stuff anyway?"

I grinned. "I was always interested in science and plus, I was going to be an Eagle Scout. I needed lots of merit badges plus a project to get me there."

After that, I changed the subject a bit and said I hadn't met anyone with a working ham or short wave radio who might be able to answer these questions. That led to a conversation about how I avoided the cities and the people in them as much as possible. Going through the rough, undeveloped areas as much as possible might

be slow, but the route presented less overall risk. Stan agreed that seemed to be a prudent course of action given the circumstances.

“So, what’s your plan?” I finally asked him.

“Well, we’re just burning daylight sitting here. Let’s go see if we can get that truck started. It ran good enough to get them here, so we can just drive that beast to the farm.” Stan suggested, looking up as the ladies came back into the room.

“Stanley Edward Schechter,” Ruth said in that commanding tone I’d heard my own mother use a time or two, “you have to stay off that ankle if it is ever going to heal.”

“It’s okay ma’am,” I hastened to speak, “I’m a decent diesel mechanic, so let me go take a look at that truck. Like Stan said, it ran good enough to get those bandits here.”

“And I can help, too,” Amy volunteered, coming over and plopping her little bony butt down on my knee. I sighed when I saw Ruth’s face redden. Thankfully, Stan came to my rescue again.

“Let these kids go take a look, Ruth. We can get started packing up in here.”

Amy clapped her hands and the two of us headed for the door. As soon as we stepped out, Amy gave me one of her questioning looks.

“I thought you didn’t like traveling by vehicle? Isn’t that why we have been walking?”

I nodded, then relented with a verbal response.

“Yeah, normally that’s what I’ve seen. Within just a few hours of the lights going out, gangs or National Guard troops were seizing any vehicles still running. But, if these boys had buddies, I want to be gone by the time they show up. We won’t get far with Stan gimpy and having to carry Sophia.”

Amy turned, her eyes searching mine.

“You saw National Guard units up north? Like, getting things together? I haven’t heard anything about the government since everything started.” I could hear the hope in her voice but with my headshake I saw that light dim as she continued. This was going the direction I avoided with Stan, but I’d already resolved to share whatever I knew with Amy.

“And you never mentioned them before, because they weren’t working for the government anymore, were they?”

“No, not the ones I saw. There was a camp, where somebody tried to set up early on, but by the time I came along these weren’t soldiers, just thugs with guns. Stealing, raping, and killing...just another gang. You know, just about everywhere I’ve been, there’s been groups of assholes trying to set up their own little kingdoms. Doing the raiding and pillaging thing. Doubt Harrison is any different.” I paused.

“And I figure these four guys had friends somewhere in the area, so we need to haul ass.”

“So how are you planning to keep this truck if we can get it running?”

“Gun up with what we recovered from the dead bandits and kill anybody who looks at us funny. I may even have to suspend my three raider bag limit with you and the Schectors along for the ride.”

Amy started to laugh until she looked closely at my face and saw I was dead serious.

“Well, okay then,” was all she had to say after that.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The truck, a mid 70s Ford crew cab pickup with a cracked topper shell, started easily enough once I located the keys. I hated digging in the pockets of the dead, just because of the stink, but the proximity to a corpse no longer fazed me. I was never very squeamish, but now I had to wonder at how desensitized I had become that I

barely thought about the dead around me, even the ones I caused. Hell, especially the ones I caused.

I shelved the Dr. Phil speculation as I listened to the big diesel engine rumble for a few minutes before shutting off the key and moving on to salvaging. Which means stripping the raiders of anything else of use, and they had a lot of useful items for sure. To the victor goes the spoils and I was surely entitled to the spoils off three of those four corpses, but nice guy that I am I was already planning to share. Within reason, of course.

While I turned out pockets and stripped off belts and boots, Ruth and Amy made a quick inventory of the contents of the camper shell and then started loading our gear. Stan sat on the front porch with a scoped hunting rifle in hand, his bad foot propped up and Sophia resting in her kid carrier on the ground next to him.

"Amy, keep your backpack on the floor in the truck," I cautioned her as she was in the truck bed, and all three adults turned to me for an explanation.

"In case we have to bail out of the truck, keep at least your little pack close to you at all times. Just like your weapons, if you need it and it's not there, then you never had it to begin with."

Amy nodded but Ruth gave me a look before asking, "No offense, but how does a sixteen year old know all this stuff?"

"Well, that saying was something my daddy always said, and he was a Marine for most of my life. My dad was always teaching me stuff but now it really comes in handy. Plus, I've learned if you gotta run, don't take time to mess around packing."

"He sounds like a smart guy. I'm sure him and your mom are just fine," Ruth said, and I thought she really meant her words.

"That's what I am hoping. Now, who wants more guns?"

I said the last part with a silly voice, like I imagined a used car salesman might sound. Stan had already said he was sticking with his hunting rifle, a Savage Axis, chambered in .308 Winchester. Inexpensive and reliable, the Savage matched calibers with the CETME battle rifle I retrieved off the first raider I stripped. Along with five loaded magazines and four empties, and with the ammo being the same, I figured either Stan would snatch it up or failing that, Ruth, so she could replace the shotgun she now carried.

Ruth, too, had other ideas.

"Luke, that thing is huge, and I don't know how it works at all. Plus with that charging handle thingie on the side, what the heck were they thinking?"

Of course, she was talking about the left side charging handle, which was different from most systems. At least, American systems. The style was right popular with European military forces for a number of years in various incarnations. Yes, I broke out one of my big words.

Instead, Ruth opted for the Yugoslavian made Simonov SKS rifle I stripped from the backyard bandit. Bone stock with the ten round attached magazine and nicked wooden furniture, the SKS wouldn't win any beauty contests but was a solid, reliable rifle.

"My daddy taught me how to shoot with one of these," she explained, "before he bought me my first deer rifle."

So I kept the CETME and handed Ruth a cloth bag full of spare ammo for her rifle, preloaded onto stripper clips. She thanked me with a smile that made her somewhat pinched features flash very pretty. I realized Ruth would have been considered very attractive before, but worry and short rations had taken their toll. Also, I noted she took the same care as Amy did to dress down and keep her hair covered.

When I went back to the dead thug with the big .308 battle rifle to snag his magazine carrier chest rig, I felt a little shiver run up my spine as I saw the body armor he wore underneath. Had I not shot him in his exposed armpit, my bullet would have merely knocked him down and not killed him. Maybe not even have knocked him down, for that matter. Probably just pissed him off.

From my reading, I knew the 38 Special round was decent, having been a staple with law enforcement for many years, but was not really what was considered a man stopper. My only experience with the caliber was second hand, since my mom used 38 Special in her 357 Magnum when she wanted to target practice with low recoil.

I said nothing about the armor as I used a rag cut from the dead man's undershirt to wipe down the blood from the chest rig, armor, and other gear. I would need to clean everything up later, but now I was working on short time and wanted to get us on the road. I stripped off my light jacket, put on the armor and cinched up the Velcro side straps, then wrestled the chest rig and magazine holders over the armor. I felt thirty pounds heavier but I thumped the ballistic chest plate and grinned.

The corpse had a 1911 still holstered at his hip and I claimed the gunbelt and spare magazines, loading everything into a duffle bag destined for the covered truck bed. That would go to Amy unless I found something better for her.

The other two bandits also carried rifles that I took for our trouble. One, a tricked out Ruger 10/22 with synthetic stock, 2x scope and a trio of 25 round magazines, I set aside for Amy as well. This wasn't a battle rifle but I knew she could shoot it and one of the packs she found in the truck contained nearly a thousand rounds of 22LR to be added to our ammo stock.

I also picked up three extra pistols from the dead men since the Schectors had their own, as well as every round of ammo I found on the bodies. I was unsurprised to find that all four men had small amounts of gold and silver coins in their packs, as well as dozens of gold rings, necklaces and such. I felt bad for the rightful owners, but took everything anyway.

The other rifle was an AK-47 style semi-automatic rifle, a WASR I think they were called, with three spare magazines and a half full magazine still in the rifle. I offered the WASR to Stan for his use and the man declined, saying he would keep the Savage or switch for his wife's shotgun. He explained he figured he would be driving anyway. Ruth was quick to shoot that idea down.

"Honey, how are you going to shift with your ankle the way it is? I'll drive and you can help protect us if you'll let Luke show you how to use that other rifle."

Ruth had a point and we all knew it, so Stan shrugged and I took ten minutes to run him through the basics for using the Romanian made rifle. This pattern of rifle was fairly straightforward and while not known for its accuracy at longer distance, the weapon was easy to maintain and service. Well, if we needed sniping then Stan had the Savage. I found it interesting that Ruth automatically assumed I knew how to use the weapon, and I filed the thought away for later but it did make me wonder about her parents. Maybe they were like mine.

Finally we were ready to go. With Ruth in the driver's seat I expected Stan to climb in beside her, but instead he went to the back bench seat and began rigging up car seat out of Sophia's baby carrier and some bungee cord from the truck bed. In only a few minutes he had a well anchored safety cocoon for his daughter. I looked at that sweet little face and began shucking out of my chest rig and other gear, removing the body armor and draping the Kevlar around the carrier until the baby was covered on all sides.

Ruth immediately realized what I was doing and came running around the front of the truck to give me a big hug, unmindful of the tears streaming down her cheeks. Stan gave a grin but clearly didn't get exactly what happened. I asked for everybody to load up and we could talk on the road. Ruth returned to the driver's seat, Stan sitting behind her. Amy sat in the back passenger side spot, leaving me shotgun.

"That's a bulletproof vest, Stan. Luke took off his freakin' bullet proof vest to protect our little girl," Ruth gushed as she pulled the heavy pickup out onto the gravel road.

"Too hot anyway," I said, embarrassed by the praise and kind words. Both had been pretty sparse on this trip.

We had only traveled a few hundred yards down the driveway when Amy spoke up.

"So, Luke, what exactly should we be looking for?"

Ruth braked and we sat there at the verge of the county road as I struggled to put my thought into words.

"Ahh, well, this is just based on what I've read and what my Dad talked about, but we need to each take responsibility for a piece of the perimeter and watch for any movement. That sounds easier said than done I know," I held up a hand to forestall any complaints, "but each one of us needs to be watching constantly."

"This reminds me of a movie I saw once," Stan piped up, "about bomber air crews in World War II where the gunners all had a sector to watch for enemy fighters. That way they could coordinate fire."

"That's a great example, Stan. Yeah, like that. Would be better if we had someone in the truck bed to watch our rear, but there's just the four of us. Think of the world around us as a clock, with straight ahead as twelve o'clock and directly behind us as six o'clock. Middle right is three o'clock and middle left is nine o'clock. Everybody got that?"

I received two "yeahs" and a "pleeeeeease" from Amy that made me grin. I'd already run that drill with my friend until she was proficient in making the call.

"Now Stan, you'll need to help Ruth cover her sector more, since she is going to be more focused on straight ahead, but I'll help there as well. Amy, you just keep doing like you're doing, scanning for trouble to that side and the rear. Look for movement, anything disturbing the grass or any objects out of place. Desperate people might try to roll something into the road to stop us, so two vehicles might be pushed close together to make a choke point."

"Or they might shoot at us," Amy continued.

"Or they might shoot at us," I echoed, "and if they do, unload everything you have in their direction while Ruth stomps on the gas. And Ruth, if somebody steps in front of you, do not hesitate to run over them, alright?"

"You got it" was all she said as she shifted back into gear and turned right on the road. This was a dusty little county road that eventually fed into a larger highway headed west, towards Siloam Springs and our destination.

We settled into watchful silence as each one of us practiced our terrain scanning abilities, something that turned out to be more difficult than I first figured. Keeping your eyes constantly moving without being distracted, while mentally preparing to shoot at anything or everything around you could prove exhausting. Walking through the same territory was a much slower process, obviously, but the danger points didn't rush up and past at forty miles per hour. Now I finally understood what my father meant when he said foot patrols weren't as scary as riding around in a Humvee looking for trouble, and I knew I had made the right choice going on foot to start my journey.

"If driving is so dangerous, why were you in such a hurry to hit the road in this truck, Luke?" Amy finally asked. Since we had touched on the subject earlier and the thought was heavy on my thoughts, I was able to respond immediately.

"I don't think those four guys were working alone. I want to be miles away before their buddies come looking. With that extra diesel you found in those cans, we should have plenty to make it to Ruth's folks' place. Maybe by this evening if everything goes just right. "

Left unsaid was that with Stan's bum ankle and Sophia needing to be carried, the Schecters would have been moving at a snail's pace. Everybody knew this, and I didn't want to make our new acquaintances feel like more of a burden. Driving to Siloam Springs might be a gamble, but if Ruth's family was still holding out, that would make it a fair deal. Amy and I could use some time off the road. Thinking of that made me remember something said earlier.

"Ruth, who is Dwight? You asked me earlier if I was with him. Amy and I don't know anybody in Harrison, except you guys, now."

"Oh, he was running the roadblock when we came into town. Working with the county sheriff's office, he said. They didn't want to let us through until I shown him the envelope from a Christmas card from Mom and Dad. It had their address on it, and he convinced the other men to let us travel through town," Ruth explained, never taking her eyes off the road. Stan chimed in right after to continue.

"They are worried about running out of food and can't take any more refugees, so I can't really blame them. Dwight even told us we could use that abandoned house to hole up for a few days while my foot healed."

At that, facts started to click together in my head.

"Will we run into another barricade if we continue this way? Amy and I came cross country and didn't see any roadblocks set up."

I heard Stan grunt in the back seat.

"Yeah, there's another checkpoint I think. That's what I heard anyway. They are covering the road so it makes sense. You think it was Dwight who set those looters on us?"

I shrugged before answering. I didn't know much for sure these days.

"Likely so. Either him or someone at the roadblock who overheard his advice to you guys. Ruth said she only went out for water at night and ya'll didn't seem to be doing anything else at that house to draw raiders. I think somebody already knew the three of you were there."

"So what are we going to do if it was the guys from the Sheriff's Department? What about the next road block?" I could tell Amy was getting nervous from the way her words seemed to run together, the syllables packed together in a tight stream of sound.

"Well," I said, letting the single word stretch for a second, "we have a little time so let's make a plan for getting past the next roadblock and then hauling ass. Cause if somebody at the roadblock was behind those raiders coming after Stan and Ruth, they'll darned sure recognize this truck."

"What do we do if they ask where we got the truck?" Ruth asked.

"Found it on the side of the road, doors open, and bodies on the ground," Stan replied. "We don't know anything, but it was abandoned property and we claimed it."

That sounded like a pretty good story and I said so. Stan was proving to be pretty fast on his feet and we all agreed to stick to that tale. It was partly true, anyway. The bodies were on the ground and the truck was left unattended.

“What if they shoot at us?” Ruth asked, and this time I had an answer of sorts.

“Stay low and drive through. If they’ve got two cars or trucks parked end to end, aim for the gap in between. Everybody else, get fire out while staying low as well. These doors and side panels won’t stop a bullet, probably, but they’re better than nothing. While Ruth is getting us through, stick your weapon out the window and shoot, fast as you can pull the trigger. I don’t care if you hit anything, just get their heads down. Start with the shotguns and switch to your rifles when you shoot yourselves dry.”

“And if they hit the engine?” Amy asked.

“Ruth will get us as far as this beast will get us, then grab your rifle and bail out bag and haul ass into the woods. Don’t stop at the edge. Get in there and regroup. Stan, you get Sophie. I’ll cover as best I can from the truck before following.”

I tried to sound like I knew what I was talking about, but really I was relying on some stories my father had shared and pulling the rest out of my ass. All the sudden, driving nearly a hundred miles with a target painted on our backs didn’t seem like such a smart idea.

The sight of the road block ahead, suddenly visible as we topped a low ridgeline, prompted a flurry of activity in the cab of the truck. I drew back the charging handle on the big CETME, and from the sounds coming from the backseat, Amy and Stan were following suit.

“Load another shell in the tube, Amy,” I said without turning, “and finger off the trigger. Don’t point the barrel out the window yet, or at me, okay? Let’s just be cool.”

Be cool. What a joke. I was sweating like a whore in church. That was one of my father’s little sayings that just drove my mom crazy. She wasn’t real religious but she thought that expression was a bit crude for my teenage ears. If only she heard some of the stuff I picked up at school. I realized I was just delaying the inevitable and finally spoke up.

“Ruth, pull on up slowly and stop about twenty yards from those two trucks sitting nose to nose. Stan, you recognize any of these guys?”

“Not yet. Still too far out. I count six though.”

I agreed with his count. Six that we could see, which meant they likely had at least half again that many we couldn’t. Sniper nests would be my guess.

“Time to get this show on the road,” Amy announced from the back seat and I felt myself start chuckling silently. She sounded so determined. Ruth glanced over cautiously and I just shook my head.

CHAPTER EIGHT

After that big buildup, the roadblock turned out to be pretty anticlimactic. One of the guards, a uniformed deputy with a handlebar mustache and a few days growth of beard came out to meet us and asked Ruth her destination. The deputy gave us all the once over, noting our weapons close at hand I'm sure, but quickly turned his attention back to Ruth. He seemed to think she was a citizen of Harrison and Ruth did nothing to dissuade him of the notion. She explained that her family (including her little brother and sister) were headed to the family farm to ride out the trouble. Deputy Savis didn't ask what she meant by trouble and Ruth did not volunteer.

"Did you register your trip with the town council? So nobody thinks you folks went missing."

"Yes, sir. All good to go. I've got some paperwork right here..." Ruth said, holding up some wrinkled sheets of paper and included the envelope with her family's address, but the deputy just waved her through.

"Just hold onto it ma'am. And be safe. I see everybody in this vehicle is heavily armed, except the baby," he said with a wry smile, "so ya'll better be ready to use them to defend yourselves. I hate to say it, but there's just no law enforcement past this point."

"Yes sir, Deputy. And thank you for doing this. I know trying to keep all of us safe is keeping you from your family."

Ruth's kind words seem to strike a chord with the deputy as he murmured "you're welcome" and waved for the others to clear the barricade for our vehicle.

As we were headed on down the road once again, Amy piped up from the back seat.

"Well, that went better than I expected."

"I don't know," Stan responded, "the deputy seemed legit but I caught one of the other guards eyeballing this truck pretty close. And he didn't look happy."

I'd missed that, but Stan was almost certainly right. Even though we'd just met today, the guy continued to impress me with his brains and cool demeanor. If his observation proved out, then the bandits had somehow infiltrated the deputies with spotters. Pick out the best targets, and steer their crews in for the kill.

"I wonder if their spotter back there has a working radio? Or access to one?" I said, knowing we had found nothing like that in this truck. There was an under dash mount for a CB, but the radio itself was long gone judging from the rust I noted on the connecting arm bolts. Well, not the rust itself but that the rust was undisturbed.

"Don't know, but I guess we need to proceed like he does," Ruth said, impressing me with her calm yet determined tone.

"Yes, ma'am. Let's get back on watch," I said, and turned my full attention back to watching my part of the perimeter. Again, I thought about how mind numbing this exercise turned out to be. After about ten minutes of this, I heard Ruth make a small gasp. When I glanced over I saw her eyes fixed on the rear view mirror, not the road.

"There's someone back there, following. I think. I keep catching a flash of light, like sunlight reflecting off the windshield." She spoke precisely, like her report might be doubted by the rest of us. With the winding nature of this little two lane road, I was surprised she could see anything back there until they were on top of us.

"Honey, can you tell if they are gaining on us or just sitting tight?" Stan responded quickly, glancing back over his shoulder as he spoke. "They might just be going the same way we are, and not be a threat."

Ruth said she couldn't tell, and she looked over at me for some reason. Advice? Reassurance? I wasn't good enough at reading her expressions yet to say for sure.

"Well, we treat them a possible threat until they show different. Ruth, you know this road pretty good, right? Go this way to visit your family?" I asked quickly.

"Yes, this is the back way to Siloam Springs but it is nearly a straight shot. We used to go this way to go see my folks."

"Okay. How far is it to the next big turn? You know a spot where you have to slow way down to navigate the bend in the road?"

I saw Ruth glance around, getting her bearings no doubt, before she responded.

"There's a turn coming up, just over this next hill, but it's not that tight of an angle, though. I think the speed limit only goes down to 35 miles per hour. There's another one, like what you mentioned, but that's maybe six, seven miles further down the road."

I weighed the options while thinking out loud. My plan was pretty basic, of course. I was no military genius, but this would be a bushwhacking, pure and simple. Stan saw where I was going immediately and volunteered to help, sprained ankle and all. Ruth wanted to protest but I quietly overrode her objections, playing the ultimate trump card.

"Ruth, Stan just wanted to make sure you and the baby get through this. He's worried, we are all worried, about what these men intend. I think between the two of us, Stan and I got a look at every man visible back at that roadblock. If any of these folks behind us were there, well, that doesn't make them bad guys but it sure don't smell right.

"I need Stan with me to run that Savage of his. But relax, we aren't planning on getting into a shootout with these guys, even if they are affiliated with those bandits we killed earlier."

"Not planning on a shootout?" Stan echoed, a little confused.

"He means he plans on ya'll just executing them" Amy piped up helpfully from the back seat. "Luke doesn't enjoy killing people, but when he has no choice, he tries to be quick and efficient about it. If the two of you shoot them and there's nobody firing back, then it ain't a shootout."

Darn, she was right. I would have made a terrible Old West gunfighter, I reckoned. I didn't go in for that whole thing about facing the other fighter in the middle of the street, waiting for him to draw first. Screw that as a plan. A guy could get killed acting that way.

"Amy's correct. If we see anybody we recognize from the roadblock, we shoot them all, take their stuff, and get back on the road. There's no good reason for

anybody from back there to be following us. Not this far out, and not this soon after we passed through the roadblock. But still, we will look before we shoot.”

That seemed to seal the deal for Stan. I wasn’t just looking for an excuse to murder and pillage. I know my callous attitude about such things had to be of some concern to him. I wasn’t a serial killer, I didn’t think. Still, my go-to move these days was to permanently eliminate a perceived threat. Even to me, that didn’t sound well balanced.

“What about the girls?” Stan asked, “Where do they wait while we take care of this?”

“There’s a rest stop a little ways further up, maybe a mile,” Ruth suggested.

I felt icy fear slither up my spine.

“No, no stopping at rest stops. No matter what, don’t go that far. That is a really, really bad idea. Just pull over on the shoulder if you can, maybe seventy five yards past the curve. Ruth, keep the truck running and Amy, bail out and cover in front of us. Use the ditch and take your rifle.”

I wanted to say more but we were out of time as Ruth rounded the curve and I noticed she had to brake to stay on the road and navigate the turn. That was nice to know. We were also shielded from view by a short stand of trees bordering the roadway on the left side, so hopefully our pursuers would not be able to tell what we had planned.

Stan and I jumped out before the vehicle completely slowed and ran to opposite sides of the road. I went right, to the outer side of the curve, while Stan headed down slightly and to the left. The narrow two lane road had decent ditches on both sides, but I went past that dip and on up to the higher ground beyond. I dove to my belly and shucked out of my pack, using it as a rest for the big rifle I was going to use.

When I glanced up, I couldn’t see Stan at all, which was probably a good thing.

“Stan, if you recognize anybody, go for the driver as soon as they get in range for you. I’ll see what I can do about any passengers,” I called out, seemingly too loud now that the truck have moved ahead a bit and sat idling. Allowing the truck to stay was a risk, but I did not want us getting separated. Plus, if these jackasses were just pushing us into an ambush of their up ahead, I didn’t want Ruth and Amy to face that alone.

“Gotcha,” he yelled back, and then it was time to get to work. The trailing truck suddenly came into sight, and even at this distance I could make out a distinctive red straw cowboy hat. The last time I saw that hat, it was worn by one of the men I’d seen hanging around the roadblock out of Harrison. Now he was standing in the bed of the modified one ton farm truck, leaning precariously against the roof of the vehicle. I chambered a round and waited, watching the truck rumble closer to our position.

"I see one from the roadblock," I yelled, and Stan agreed. He would try for the driver at two hundred yards, he added. Not a clap shot, but easily doable with his Savage hunting rifle and scope. I would follow his lead, aiming for the three men I could see crowded into the back cargo bed of the truck.

The CETME Sporter was the civilian version of the Spanish made, select fire military rifle that evolved into the G3 and the HK91. Chambered in 7.62x51, or .308 Winchester, the big rifle featured a twenty round magazine and not-so-great iron sights, but I'd shot my father's HK91 plenty of times over the last few years so the oddly placed charging handle and the gritty feeling trigger fazed me not in the least. The rifle seemed to have been well cared for when I "inherited" it, but until I pulled the trigger I would not be able to say how far off those sights might be.

As soon as I heard the boom of Stan's rifle, I began taking my own shots. The CETME was a beast for recoil like I remembered, but I rode the hard thump into my shoulder and stroked the trigger once more. I could tell the sights were off since my first shot slammed into the roof of the truck rather than my target, but the second shot seemed to cause one of the thugs to stumble back and somersault off the back of the truck. Luck rather than skill but I'd still take it. Then the truck started swerving from side to side, which made me think Stan's shots had the desired effect.

In the movies, the truck would have veered out of control, and then rolled over ten times on the pavement. Or else, continued driving straight ahead at breakneck speed until slamming into a conveniently placed bridge abutment.

In reality, the truck coasted to a stop about seventy five yards from our position and men started trying to scramble behind the bulk of the truck body for cover. Well, the two men still alive in the truck bed, anyway. Given the blood spray across the inside of the bullet starred windshield, nobody in the cab was getting out under their own power.

I managed to hit one of the men on the outside of the thigh, almost at the hip, and he spun with a jerk and accidentally tumbled out of the truck on the side exposed to our fire. He went down hard and a spray of fully automatic fire exploded from the black rifle his hands. The rounds snapped by high and to the left of me, but still caused me to flinch. That looked like a real M4 carbine, which might open up a whole other avenue of trouble.

Fortunately, the magazine in the carbine was exhausted and the weapon dropped to the pavement. The wounded man lay still, either unconscious or possibly even dead from the fall. I wasn't hitting where I was aiming, but at least now I had an idea of how to compensate for the sights.

The last of the bandits dove off the truck bed and seemed to stagger in mid-air. I heard the boom of the Savage and figured Stan was a pretty good deer hunter after all. Hitting targets on the move is never easy.

"Reloading," Stan called.

"Covering," I replied, remembering that response from a war movie I'd seen once. And I was, too, carefully scrutinizing the area around the truck for any movement. I saw nothing stirring, except the ragged breathing of the sprawled form on the pavement beside the truck. Still alive after all.

"I'm good now, Luke," Stan said more softly now, and I nodded to myself and took a second to swap for a full magazine for my rifle. I'd only burned through five or six rounds from the CETME but better to make the exchange now than run out later. I safed the rifle, slung my pack, and edged closer to the road, CETME still at the ready.

"Stan, coming over," I said loudly, wanting make sure he heard me.

"Come on. I'll cover the road."

So I ran across the two lanes and zeroed in on where Stan was kneeling, rifle shouldered and peering through his scope. I saw Stan glance my way but quickly he returned his attention to the road.

"How many were in the cab?" I asked.

"Two of them. Driver was a guy I didn't see today at the roadblock, but he was there when we came in the other day. I got both of them with headshots I think."

"Three guys in the back. One still alive, but not sure about the one you shot that fell on the other side."

"Can't we just go? Nobody is going to come looking for us for this, I don't think." Stan asked, his voice steady but his eyes pleading. He was not a violent man by nature and now that the immediate threat was handled, Stan wanted to get back on the road. Sensible and I wanted to agree, but what if they were herding us to their own ambush? When I asked that very question, Stan looked sick.

"What can we do?"

"Well, I can go ask that survivor some questions before he bleeds to death. Then we can plan accordingly. Wave the girls back down here, and we can let Ruth and Amy provide overwatch while we go ask our questions and load up whatever we find laying around."

"You really think he is going to bleed to death?"

I nodded.

"Oh, I can guarantee he will after we get done with him. Hard to heal up from a cut throat."

Stan looked like he wanted to be sick and said, "Jesus, Luke, they have a merit badge for that? What kind of Boy Scout does that?"

"Stan, these bandits would have killed you and you don't want to think about what they might have done to your family. I'm the kind of Boy Scout that wants to live to see his family, and you better be too."

That seemed to get through to the man and he said nothing else as we made our way down to the scene of carnage, under Amy's watchful eye. Ruth stood watch to the front and we let Sophia sleep as long as she wanted. I tried not to think that this might have been us spread out in a gruesome tableau if the day's events had turned out differently.

Tableau? Was that the right word? That was one of the words I learned prepping for the SAT test to build my vocabulary. I sometimes grope around for the right word at the darndest of times. I knew I was trying to ignore the elephant in the room, but torturing this man was not going to be fun. Killing him in the heat of battle, not a problem. Even cutting his throat now, as a prisoner, not so bad.

But torture? Could I do it?

Then I looked back over my shoulder and saw Amy and Ruth. Both were standing watch, weapons in hand, trying to look intimidating. Amy, since she was facing me, offered up a wry little smile of encouragement.

"Stan, you tie his hands and feet. Ask him the questions. I'll handle the rest" I said, drawing the old butcher knife I still carried from the makeshift cardboard scabbard on my hip. The knife wasn't all that sharp, even with me working the blade over with a stone a few times, but the edge was enough for what we would need to do.

Hell, I'd skin him if necessary, if that would get us the information we needed. These people, some I'd only known for a day, meant enough to me that I would listen to the screams and endure the stares later if only my actions would be enough to keep them safe.

My daddy always said that whatever we were doing on the farm, whether it was cleaning out the pig pen or mucking out the horse stalls, beat walking in the rain. I never understood as a child, but not long before I headed off on this cursed trip, I finally got him to explain what he meant by that expression.

"Luke, my old platoon sergeant used to say that. It was just a throw-away line, but he would always come out with that when we bitched about some particularly nasty job. Whatever terrible chore he needed done, from burning the honey barrels to bagging blown up chunks of your buddies after a mortar attack, he always said doing this job was better than walking in the rain. Just a way of tricking your mind, I guess. Whatever hard thing you have to do, just imagine that the alternative might be worse. That's all it means."

Well, now I really understood, standing there on that deserted stretch of highway, doing whatever I needed to get the job done. Better than walking in the rain.

CHAPTER NINE

We rode for a long time in silence, each of us occupied with our own thoughts while at the same time maintaining a high level of readiness. I watched the green world flash by outside my window and mulled over what I had learned.

Torture, as it turned out, had not been necessary to get the wounded man to talk. Heck, once he started the hard part was getting him to shut up. Mainly about the gruesome wound in his thigh, where my rifle round had apparently broken his femur as well as blowing a huge chunk of muscle and tissue out of the middle of his leg. The bandit cried and moaned a lot as I tried to staunch the flow of blood but one look told me this guy did not have long.

Stan asked the questions and I stood there with my knife in hand, ready to start carving if the well ran dry. Before the dying man lapsed into unconsciousness, we had what we needed and I set about scavenging the dead. The last of the bandits expired before I finished with my chores.

Stan watched me work for a moment before walking back to relieve his wife from her watch duties. He seemed a little green, like all the blood and death might be getting to him, but every time I checked he was still maintaining a good lookout.

Stripping the dead took about fifteen minutes and in the end we added three AR-15s, a pair of twelve gauge shotguns, and what appeared to be a select fire Colt M4. The Oklahoma National Guard emblem made me wonder briefly how the weapon had ended up here, but I set that thought aside and grabbed all of the magazines and ammunition I could find. The magazines and ammo for the M4 and the AR-15s were interchangeable, so that was a plus.

"What about their truck?" Amy asked. She had kept watch on our back trail while Stan focused on the road ahead. So far, neither had reported any sign of traffic, pedestrian or motorized.

"We can't take it with us," I replied sadly, "we don't have enough of us to properly protect the one we have. Splitting up is not a good idea."

"What about taking it with us a ways and hiding it?" Stan suggested. "There's plenty of old dirt roads and logging trails along the way. Just go until we find a likely place, pull off and conceal it for later. Maybe we can come back for it with some men from the farm. Just having a running vehicle these days is a valuable asset."

Since the dying bandit had assured us they were not herding us into an ambush, Stan's idea made some sense. We decided to at least try to stash the truck for later recovery and I drug the bodies into a convenient ditch and let gravity dictate their final resting places. With the plan being to run us off the road, rape the women and kill us men folks, I wasn't feeling like wasting any time digging graves. For his part, Stan offered to help but I wanted him off his bad ankle and back in our truck.

"I think I might know a place," Ruth finally volunteered. "There's a turnoff about four miles up the road. Leads to an old private cemetery that nobody has used in years. The locals know about it but since there's only a tumble down old shed nearby nobody would think to salvage from there."

Stan gave his wife a funny look and Ruth laughed despite the tension of the last hour.

"No, honey, it's not an old make out place from when I was in high school. One of my great, great uncles is buried out there and I went to see if I could find the tombstone. You know, helping mom with her genealogy research."

We all agreed this sounded like a decent plan so I volunteered to drive the captured one ton farm truck while Ruth followed with Stan, Amy and little Sophia riding with her. I repeatedly warned Ruth not to slow down near the rest stop and for everyone to be ready to fight. Despite some funny looks, nobody said anything at the time.

Before we started out, I laid a feed sack down in the driver's seat and tried to squeegee the inside of the windshield with a piece of shirt salvaged from one of the

dead to clear the glass enough to drive. Both the driver and passenger had been struck in the head by Stan's shots and the truck cab resembled the inside of a blender when I pulled out the two corpses. A blender set on high and used to puree brains, I thought to myself.

So our little convoy of two vehicles rumbled on down the road, and I felt that familiar touch of ice on my spine as we drove past the roadside rest area ahead. Splitting my attention away from the asphalt strip was bad practice, but I'd insisted I could make it on my own and I was determined to do just that. Most of the rest area was hidden by a row of bushes and I could just make out the shape of metal canopies through the twisted limbs.

Nothing moved, but I kept my hand tight on the pistol grip of the M4 resting on the seat next to me. I'd reloaded the carbine and kept three spare magazines handy next to the weapon. At the first sign of trouble, I intended to point this bullet hose in that direction and open the spray.

Only after we were a good half mile past the turnoff did I relax enough to turn my attention fully back to the road in front of me. I resolved not to make that mistake again and listen when Amy insisted she could ride shotgun for me.

The cemetery was just as Ruth described it, an overgrown wide spot next to a dusty dirt road that looked undisturbed since well before the lights went out. I pulled the rig up next to the only structure around, a dilapidated shed squatting in a second clearing behind and adjacent to the tombstone dotted piece of property.

Ruth said the shed was left over from when the tiny cemetery association still maintained the property and the last members had probably died off back before any of us were born. Now, usually such a building would have been appropriated by one of the many wandering meth cooking gangs that roamed the rural landscape but Stan expressed doubts any would have bothered the cemetery. Meth heads were, by definition, idiots or they wouldn't be poisoning themselves in the first place, but they were also highly paranoid and setting up shop next to a bunch of dead bodies might make them even twitchier than usual.

Stan and I cleared the shed and found it to be completely empty except for signs of raccoon scat on the dirt floor and what might have been the scattered skeleton of a rat in one corner. I drove the heavy duty work truck, carefully, into the narrow space and killed the engine.

A quick check of the glove compartment and under the seat revealed no useful items, just random receipts and other useless pieces of paper, so I slid out the driver's side door and carefully maneuvered myself out of the tight confines of the shed. Fortunately, the truck's heavy pipe bumper just cleared the rusted sheet metal tin of the shed's door.

"We all good?" Stan asked, limping back over to our truck. Sweat covered his tanned face and I knew the ankle had to be killing him but he kept going without a murmur of complaint. The more time I spent with the man the more I realized he was

just that solid. Stan Schecter was the right guy to be watching your back on a trip like this, and I was glad he was watching mine.

“Yessir. Just took a last look but I think we got everything worth taking. Let’s fuel up and be on our way.”

“Disabled the truck already?” Amy asked as I approached.

“Nah, just took the key. Heck, I could barely squeeze out on the driver’s side. Let me get the fuel can and top this baby off.”

Taking care of that little chore quickly, I re strapped the fuel containers in the back of the truck and slid into the front seat once again. I estimated we had about twelve gallons of diesel left in reserve split between three cans in addition to the full tanks on the truck. That should get us to Siloam Springs even if we had to take every dirt road and goat path between here and there. I decided to use some of that extra fuel and I asked Ruth to head further up the dirt road for a little ways.

“Does anybody live back here?” I asked her.

“Don’t know. I just came out the one time but the road looks pretty overgrown.”

When we came to a spot in the road where the trees overlapped the road to form a canopy overhead I asked Ruth to stop and she braked without hesitation. I hopped out and glanced around, clocking my surroundings like a gopher popping out of his hole. I saw thick stands of waist high and better saplings growing all along the side of the road and went to my backpack to retrieve my hatchet.

“You going to try covering our tracks?” Stan asked, observing from the back seat as I hacked down a dozen leafy saplings. He was watching around us, his eyes moving constantly like I had done earlier. Ruth had backed up and turned the truck around, facing the direction we needed to go, and I was almost finished weaving the drag into place.

“If it works, yeah,” I replied. “If not, I want to make it look like we drove out on this road but not in, especially around the cemetery. Mess up the tracks, anyway.”

Using a few scraps of rope, I secured the saplings into a rough spread and tied off to the truck’s trailer hitch. Ruth smiled at me when I said, “Punch it. But softly.” She knew what I meant. After a few miles of sweeping the dirt road, we pulled up to the hardtop road as a blistering twenty miles per hour.

Once I cut loose the drag and dismantled the sad looking collection of tree limbs, I tossed the rolled up rope in the back and hopped into the cab. Ruth took off again, and this time brought the speed up to a more respectable forty miles per hour.

I had the CETME rifle wedged against the door frame of the truck but now the M4 sat in my lap, barrel barely protruding out the window. I really wished we could have brought the other truck as well as backup transportation if nothing else, but our

numbers dictated the decision. Maybe Stan or some of Ruth's family could come back for it if the world ever settled down a little.

"That thing fully automatic?" Stan asked.

"Yeah. One of the guys back there must have stole it from a National Guard unit."

"You ever fired one of those before?" Amy asked from her seat behind me.

"Yeah. Something like this, anyway."

"That must have been some kind of Boy Scout troop," Stan said with a laugh in his voice.

I just smiled and said nothing.

Actually, my father had one but I kept that part to myself. Dad had some friends still in the Corps when he retired, and one of them must have supplied the rifle my father kept buried in a metal tube out behind the back fence. It was a full length M16A3 with select fire capability rather than the three round burst setting as seen on the M16A2.

Of course, my father did not explain this, but Wikipedia is a wonderful learning tool. Was, I reminded myself. Now we were back to printed reference material. Crap.

Then I laughed and got weird looks from everybody in the truck cab, as usual.

"What were you thinking about?" Ruth asked, almost like she was scared of my answer.

"Just thinking that now I am going to have to do all my school research papers using actual paper reference sources. Instead of the internet."

"What? Who's going back to school? Luke, school's out forever..." Amy sang that last little bit, echoing an Oldies rock song I could barely recall.

Ignoring Amy's comment, Ruth asked the question I had been quietly dreading.

"Luke, what was it about the rest stop that had you so, well, tense?"

"Sorry about that. My paranoia sometimes gets the best of me," I replied sincerely. I worried about that at times, now mainly late at night after Amy fell asleep. If the world ever somehow got back to normal, what would I do? Finish high school and go off to college? Study engineering like I planned?

I couldn't sleep through the night without nightmares and I woke up every few hours to check the perimeter. I literally slept with a gun in my hand, and if the lights came back on tomorrow, what would I do then? My paranoid mind was fully engaged, and I worried about ever being able to normal. Living like an animal can do that to you.

“What happened, Luke?” Amy voice, soft and caring, suddenly broke through my dark thoughts.

“Alright, I guess it is story time. But everybody needs to keep their watch up, since we will be getting close to Berryville pretty soon. Eyes out. That includes you, Sophia.”

From the soft gurgle I heard, the baby was awake now, too. Hopefully she would not understand the words coming next. I sighed, but figured they needed to hear this story.

“About two weeks after I left Chicago, I was out of food again and nearly out of water as well. I’d been scavenging what I could find along the way but pickings were real slim because everybody else was doing the same thing.

“I think it was around Quincy, Illinois but I’m not really sure. The little road I was on had some foot traffic and I was real wary of some of the folks I was traveling with. But we were all headed the same way, so I tried to be polite and just kept my distance. Those with families were the most dangerous and unpredictable.”

“Why was that?” Amy asked cautiously, as if unwilling to offend our newly minted friends.

“They had the most left to lose, I guess. Anyway, we are all just about out of water when someone noticed the sign for a rest stop ahead. There were five or six of us walking close together at that point, not together but, you know, we just happened to be near each other was all. I’d learned earlier that some of the older rest stops still had hand pumps, so we could at least fill up our water bottles if this one did.”

“Of course, the place was already occupied by what looked like maybe thirty squatters, mostly men. The two women who were walking with us immediately took note of this and veered off back to the road. As we got closer, one of the squatters, an older man in an absolutely filthy black suit coat, said they were out of food but the water in the restrooms still worked and we were welcome to fill up our bottles.”

I stopped talking for a moment, my head on a swivel as I tracked the terrain around our truck. We were passing through a wide field, rows of corn swaying in the late afternoon breeze. No people visible, but a few cars dead on the shoulder of the road. That was a sign in some areas I had traveled that these vehicles had already been scavenged.

The others took note of my heightened sense of concern and conducted their own visual sweeps of the surrounding area. While that was being done I looked at the map in my lap and tried to calculate time and distance in my head.

“So Ruth, your parents have their farm between Siloam Spring and Gentry, right?” I asked, looking up from the map to look out the window once again.

“Yes, other side of Gentry, though. Between Gentry and Davenport, but nobody knows where those little towns are located so I just say ‘outside Siloam Springs’ when talking about the farm.”

I nodded to myself. We did the same thing back home.

“Well, I don’t think we are going to make it before nightfall after all. Too many distractions slowed us down.”

“Distractions? You figure people trying to kill you are distractions now?” Ruth replied, giving me a look like I had a second head growing out of my neck.

“So what happened next?” Amy prompted, anxious to hear the rest of the story.

“Ruth, those guys trying to run us down were a sideshow, really. They were chasing us without a blocking force in front and didn’t take into account that we’d already killed four of their men and took the truck. Idiots. But I’m worried about approaching that Bentonville Fayetteville corridor ahead. How do we cross over and reach Gentry without getting robbed or killed. Any suggestions?”

“Well,” Stan said finally, “we were planning on taking a dirt road that skirts Hobbs State Park and then shoot through on a side route between Springdale and Lowell. That was the plan on foot and I don’t see why we can’t try in by vehicle.”

I looked at the map closely and agreed. I felt like a fool for not spending more time earlier discussing the route. At the time, I was acting more from instinct than thought when I went along with the internal combustion plan over using our “leather personnel carriers”. Yeah, that was another zinger from my Dad. Then I realized neither Stan nor Ruth had time to think out the best way to go either and were playing it by ear.

“I agree, Stan. How about we take some time this afternoon and really pour over our options, though. You two guys are our experts on the area, so why don’t we find somewhere to hole up, and get an early start tomorrow?”

From their enthusiastic responses, I figured out Ruth and Stan were as exhausted as I was. I hadn’t gotten all the details of their trip to Harrison yet, but I knew it didn’t involve a lot of mornings spent sleeping in a nice comfy hotel room or lying by the pool.

“Alright, I know a place where we can spend the night, just south of Berryville,” Ruth volunteered, and Amy gave a laugh from the back seat.

“Is it another graveyard, Ruth? And I am only agreeing to stop if Luke promises to finish telling his story.”

“Nope, not a graveyard. But I’ll bet the place is as quiet as a graveyard when we get there.”

CHAPTER TEN

Ruth was right. The location she had in mind was a computer repair center and it looked untouched since the day the lights went out.

The prefab, white metal building looked more like a barn than a computer repair store, but the sign up front on the two lane county road proclaims this to be "Sid's Computer Stand". No cars in the gravel lot and iron burglar bars covered the windows in the front. I saw a few buildings nearby but they looked to be farm storage for equipment and such, not homes or other businesses. Corn fields surrounded the store on three sides and I wondered if anybody was lurking out there in the fields. Ruth drove like she knew her way around as she guided the Ford pickup around back and parked in a spot near the metal door. I clocked the metal roll up garage door next to the personnel entryway and started thinking about our security.

"Sid's my uncle. Well, he's married to my mom's sister. Nice guy, anyway," Ruth explained as she killed the engine. After the near constant rumble of the big diesel engine, my ears seemed stunned by the absence of noise. No car horns, no dogs barking; nothing sounded in the still air. This was the country, but still, the silence of the world sometimes made me wonder if I was going deaf.

Stan's voice broke the spell.

“Well, let me get the key and we can go inside,” he said, and proceeded to do just that. The hide-a-key box was located under the metal brace of the small canopy shielding the back door. Before he cracked the door, though, he waited for me to complete a circuit around the outside of the structure. When I saw no signs of forced entry, I gave the ‘go ahead’ and Stan proceeded to unlock the heavy deadbolt securing the door.

Despite my earlier check of the outside, Stan knelt to the side, favoring his bad ankle, when he unlocked the door. If someone was hiding inside, he sure didn’t want to present too easy of a target. With the girls sticking by the truck, I stood behind Stan until the metal fire door swung open and waited a beat before rounding into the room.

I moved carefully, “slicing the pie” as my dad called it. With the fading sunlight, visibility was low inside and the jumble of computer monitors and assorted parts, boxes, and shelving along each wall made the job more difficult. In addition to the piles of supplies and such, the large room featured three computer work stations and what looked like a small repair cubby with soldering irons and voltage meters. That told me they did more than sling software here, anyway.

“Wish I had a grenade,” I said barely above a whisper, and I saw Stan stiffen in the corner of my eye as I completed my visual inspection of the back room. The Glock 21 in my hand traced my line of sight and I stepped fully into the room once I decided nothing was going to jump out at me.

“Clear,” I said and waved Stan in behind me. We paused for a brief consultation and he informed me the only other rooms in the building were the store front and a unisex bathroom.

“Why did you wish for a grenade? And don’t blame it on the Boy Scouts,” Stan said, stealing my line.

“It was just a joke. My dad always complained about all the dangers inherent in clearing rooms. From the fatal funnel of the doorway to all the little crawlspaces and hidey holes, going into buildings is always a good way to get shot. If I had a grenade, I could just toss it in and wait outside for the dust to clear. My dad said they almost never did that though, since it violated their Rules of Engagement.”

“That’s cold, but I see what you mean,” Stan agreed, and he turned to wave the ladies into to join them. “You want some help clearing the other two rooms?”

“Nah, I got this. Something I’ve had a lot of experience doing in the last few months.”

I did the job right and took my time, using the small flashlight to search as my pistol followed my sight line through the spaces. My Dad taught me the rudiments of room clearing as a game, playing paint ball of all things, but I hadn’t exaggerated about my recent experience. Every single time you entered a home, or office, or retail business, you either checked for other predators or you got eaten.

Judging from the dust, though, no one had been in this building since shortly after the lights went out.

"Place looks a little jumbled but not looted," I reported to Ruth and Stan, joining them at a quartet of seats arranged in the back room. Sophia claimed place of honor in her carrier on one of the tall tables, being entertained by Stan as Ruth went around the room making sure the few windows would be adequately covered by the heavy curtains already in place. Amy, I was proud to see, had waited just to the side of the inner doorway, pistol in hand as she served as my backup.

"Yes, Sid and my Aunt Martha live next door and I am sure they hauled everything they could gather up over to my folks' place. We kind of had a plan, in case of emergency." Ruth spoke with her head down and seemed to avoid making eye contact with anyone else in the room.

"Okay. I figured they were preppers, too."

Ruth gave me an owl-eyed stare but Stan just chuckled at my offhand response.

"What?" I said in mock protest. "You didn't think I could figure that out? Those cryptic comments about your family's farm and having plenty of provisions? I imagine your father and mine belonged to some of the same discussion groups online."

Amy just looked from face to face trying to track what was going on around her. Not that the girl wasn't sharp, but this was a bit murky for her.

"Amy, you remember how I told you my folks have our place set up to weather a bad situation?"

"Yesssss..."

"Well, Ruth is concerned because I managed to put the pieces together and guessed her mother and father are like my parents."

"Oh. Is that all? I thought it was something serious. We gonna sleep in here?"

Amy, now she was assured that everything was okay for the short term, was ready to nest for the night. I couldn't blame her in that regard.

I glanced at the Schecters, and Stan gave a nod, trying to keep the smirk off his face. Finally he just had to speak.

"Luke, when did you figure it out? Not that we were keeping it a secret," he said, giving his wife a full blown grin, "since we invited you two to join us, but Ruth's dad in particular wanted us to be careful about saying too much."

"He's right. The idea is called Opsec, or Operational Security, though the military uses that term for something else, I think. I think the first clue was when you

said Ruth convinced you to cache some gear and food in the woods out behind your house. That's the kind of thing a prepper would do.

"Plus, the way Ruth reacted when I started showing you how to use the AK clone. She didn't bat an eyelash at that, and by then she knew I was only sixteen. Just little things like that, I guess. Ruth, it really is no big deal. I won't say anything to anybody. My word on that."

I said the last bit with as much gravity as I could muster, and I think Ruth got what I meant. She blushed a bit when she replied.

"It's no big deal, Luke, really. I just worry because Daddy says I don't always think before I speak. As for Amy's question, I think we would all sleep a little better if we could pull the truck in here and park in that bay next to us."

That got a chorus of "amen's" and we quickly got rigged up for nightfall even though we still had a few hours. I liked the way we worked together and no one tried to either be bossy or shirk the work. The truck fit perfectly in what amounted to an open loading bay but none of us intended to try to sleep on those patched and threadbare fabric seats.

We created little cocoons on the concrete floor, using a pair of area rugs as a base and laying out our blankets on top for more cushion. The men we'd killed earlier, both groups, had some sleeping bags I'd liberated but none of us, not even me, felt like sleeping in them. Maybe if the nights were cooler. Maybe. For me, it felt like sleeping in a dead man's bed.

Anyway, without much conversation, we heated and ate a quick, thrown together meal of scavenged canned vegetables and a diced up can of Spam. Delicious, I thought, after a hard day of travel and mayhem.

The four of us decided on a watch schedule, with me volunteering to take the three hour shift from midnight to three a.m. Amy and I seldom set watches with just the two of us, but the idea of being able to sleep without one eye open was an unexpected luxury.

Most of all, I was glad nobody remembered to get me to tell the rest of my story from that rest stop in Illinois. I still had nightmares about that place, and I darn sure didn't want to talk about it right before bed.

Using the little bathroom off the main showroom, I brushed my teeth at the sink and took a quick sponge bath, using as little water as possible but wiping down my face, arms and neck. I still reeked of body odor, but the absence of stale sweat and oil from my exposed skin felt nice. Bath time usually entailed wading into a creek and scrubbing with sand until my skin felt raw but I'd only managed those breaks once every week or so.

While Amy took her own clean up time in the bathroom, I sat by the one open window we left and slowly broke down and checked the CETME rifle by the light of the fading sun. Using a small bottle of brake fluid, I cleaned the barrel and swabbed the

chamber, trying to remove any build up of gunk. I didn't care if the rifle looked pretty or not as long as the action functioned properly.

Watching me work, Stan quickly began to copy my efforts, first cleaning the Savage and then the AK I'd loaned him. When I explained about how the brake fluid worked as a substitute for cleaning solution, he mentioned reading that piece of information somewhere and promptly forgetting it.

When Amy joined me later on our little pallet, she curled up at my back and complained that I stank. Ruth, sitting first watch, overheard the comment and tried to stifle a giggle. The sound made me grin in the dark.

"Sorry dear. I think we all need a bath," I tried to reply diplomatically.

"Not that silly. The brake fluid. I can still smell it on your hands. One of my science teachers at school said that stuff can cause cancer, you know."

I grunted in agreement, but I figured cancer would not be much of a concern. Heck, I was sort of amazed I'd lasted this long. I rolled over, gave Amy a hug and drifted off to sleep. Amy whispered something but I was too tired to catch the words. At least, that was what I told myself.

Love you too, I thought as my mind drifted off into a troubled slumber.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

"So, what happened next?"

Amy's question from the back seat caught me off guard. We were twenty minutes into our drive, and so far conversation in the truck cab had been surprisingly quiet over the loud purr of the engine. All four of us adults had gotten some much needed rest by stopping early the day before, and despite my sleep being split by the three hour watch I was feeling pretty darned good.

We'd risen before dawn; more due to little Sophia's fussing than any eagerness on our part, and made a quick check of the store for any usable items. I felt a bit uncomfortable rifling the shelves and cabinets since this business was owned by Ruth's family. Awkward, but Ruth insisted that her Uncle Sid and Aunt Joan would want us to take anything we needed or could use.

“They’ll be at the farm, so think of it as returning the property to its rightful owners,” Ruth explained when I had voiced my concerns. Really, I was surprised to find I still had any lines I was unwilling to cross. That made me smile to myself, since apparently salvaging from a friend’s family was still too far for me.

The store really offered little in the way of items directly useful but I found a few voltmeters and assorted small electrical tools that Sid might find a use for, and placed them in a box. Amy located a pair of one gallon water bottles stored in one of the cabinets and we added that to our meager haul. The small house next door that belonged to the Stevensons was likewise stripped of any food, water or firearms and Ruth gave a happy little cheer when she saw the attached two car garage was empty.

“Sid and Joan had a pair of bug out vehicles, one a Suburban and the other a pickup, with non-electric diesel engines” Stan said, “so they both likely got out with everything from their basement storage.”

“If they were so well set up here, why leave?” Amy had asked.

“Safety in numbers,” I said. “This is a nice little homestead but it is on a county road and with just the two of them I bet they would be hard-pressed to maintain security.”

Nobody had anything to say after that, so we loaded up in our same order as the day before. I had an idea where Ruth wanted to go but I worried how close the route would take us to the state park. Desperate people would have already flocked to the area lakes for water sources, eventually fouling them with improper sanitation, and I worried about ambushes or more barricaded roads.

And now, Amy brings up a story that needed to be told, but I cringed at the thought of reliving those moments.

“Yeah, Luke, what is the deal with your aversion to rest stops? We never did hear the reason.”

“Alright,” I surrendered with a sigh as Ruth chimed in her opinion.

“I did say I would finish the story and I will but please, don’t ask me to repeat it, alright?”

“Amy, Ruth, if Luke thinks it’s that bad, maybe we should just let it lie,” Stan reasoned.

“No,” I said with a wan smile I tried to plaster on my face. “You guys need to be aware of this. First, anyone know how long it takes a person to starve to death? A reasonable sized person, like before? No food but with water?”

“A week?” Ruth guessed.

“Three weeks?” Amy’s guess was better.

“Forty days, more or less, is what I read somewhere,” Stan finally said and the two women made their guesses.

“Yes, Stan, that’s what I’ve read too. That forty day point is important for a few reasons, and the first is that we are well beyond that milestone. People have already starved to death and will continue to do so. Hard to believe somebody could starve to death in the summer, but we’ve probably all seen it.”

“Now, this rest stop I was talking about earlier, somewhere outside Quincy, looked pretty shady but we needed the water and water had been offered. No food, but enough to fill our water bottles.”

“It was a trap?”

I could hear the question in Amy’s voice.

“Yes, of course, it was a trap. They had an older guy out front greeting the travelers, offering water, and ushering us on back. The squatters also had guys flanking us as we entered but they didn’t look to be armed and I didn’t think anything about it at the time. As soon as the three of us turned that last corner, we all knew it was a trap, but by then the escorts were trying to grab our arms and lead us further into that, well, that slaughterhouse.”

“What did you do? How did you have enough ammo to get clear?” Stan asked urgently, caught up by the story despite my best efforts to make it sound like some mundane chore.

I shook my head and realized most of my fellow travelers would not have seen the motion.

“Guys, this was two weeks after the lights went out. And I was coming out from Chicago. I didn’t have a gun then, just my club.”

“What kind of club?”

“The kind you make out of the wooden clothes hanger rod from your hotel room. Or at least, that’s where mine came from. I wrapped one end with some skateboard tape I found and tried to sharpen the other into a point but all I had at the time was a piece of a kitchen knife to scrape at the wood.

“Anyway, what I saw in that restroom is what I wanted to warn you guys about. Forty days to starve is what we agreed, right? This was day fourteen or fifteen and they were already eating the dead.”

“What do you...oh, shit, you are kidding, right?”

I couldn’t see Stan’s face but from the way he was breathing hoarsely, he got it. In a moment, Amy did too.

“I’d heard, but that was like an urban legend, isn’t it?”

“What are you guys talking about? Eating dead what?” Ruth was having to pay more attention to the road and the full impact of my words did not seem to sink in at the moment.

“Honey, what he means they were eating...the other travelers. The ones they were ambushing at the rest stop.”

“If one of the guards hadn’t gotten a little anxious and moved ahead of me, I don’t think I would have gotten out. They had men armed with machetes waiting just inside the doorway, and the guy to my left caught the blade right in the throat. The guy assigned to take me hesitated.”

“What did you do?” Stan blurted.

“I froze up, for just a split second.” I closed my eyes, trying to clear the image from my mind. A nude body, strapped to an overhead rope hung in the corner like a deer being processed. Standing around the partially dismembered corpse were three creatures in rubber boots and dark coveralls, all intent on their butchering chores.

“Then, I just started fighting to get out of there. I used the club, swinging it like a baseball bat and not really caring who I hit. The other guy with me, I never knew either of them by name, he had a knife and a piece of rebar and we fought together, but there were nearly twenty of them running at us. I know at least one had a gun because my new partner went down with a bullet in his belly. Everything was a blur after that, but somehow I got out and back to the road. Bloody and bruised, I somehow made it out. I didn’t stop running for at least a mile.”

What I didn’t say was that was the first time I ever killed anybody. After I broke my club I got my hands on one of their machetes, and I just chopped my way out. I’m pretty sure I killed several somebody’s that day and if I had the chance, I would have killed them all.

“So, the moral of the story is to avoid traps whenever possible. For me, that means staying away from rest stops, but everybody who lives for long on the road has their own pet paranoia. And that was only the first time I saw it going on out there. Not the last.”

“It” being that pinnacle of taboos in Western culture, cannibalism. Sorry, lazy, worthless assholes that were too clueless to hunt game animals or figure out how to properly use a fishing pole, so they started in dining on their fellow humans. The other, other, white meat.

We drove in silence after that, eyes peeled for any sign of ambush or threat. Funny how the thought of ending up on the menu will sharpen a man’s wit and stoke his courage. I thought our little group might need that stiffened spine and a good dose of real fear before this leg of our journey was completed. We still needed to skirt the state forest and shoot the gap between two of the larger cities in Arkansas. Only time would tell if we succeeded.

Telling that story might have been a painful experience for me, but strangely I felt better after sharing the gruesome tale. For once, I wasn’t alone, and being with these new friends made me feel something deep inside that had been long absent. Hope.

I might not make it to my journey's end, but at least I was traveling with people who made the trip worthwhile.

END BOOK ONE

If you enjoyed this story, please leave a positive review on Amazon. For independent writers, 5 star reviews and word of mouth are our only way to reach a larger audience.

This first book is just the beginning of Luke's adventures. The next book, twice as long and filled with bloody action and gripping suspense, will offer readers a wider view of the world, and a nation rapidly spiraling into even deeper chaos. Also, learn more about Luke's story from those lost months, and what the future holds for friends both old and new.

HOME FIRES BURNING

Walking in the Rain

Book Two

Coming soon, exclusively at Amazon.

And here is a sneak peek at the first two chapters of the next book:

CHAPTER ONE

Threading the needle between hostile, desperate camps of armed and highly suspicious survivors was not as much fun as it sounded, I quickly decided. Our new friends Ruth and Stan knew the route, sort of, from living in the area, and Ruth grew up just up the road. So, we relied on their native knowledge to navigate the tangle of gravel tracks and dirt roads over which we traveled.

Some places, though, required us to use the larger thoroughfares (another SAT word, that one), and there's where the trip got dicey. The first barricade we had to negotiate turned out to not be so bad, in the end. Just a guard party maintaining security on one of the access roads into the Hobbs State Park.

I let Ruth do the talking at first. I couldn't help but notice her Arkansas twang got a little sharper the more she spoke. The three guys at the barrier, which was a black Suburban parked across the two lane blacktop, all carried AR pattern rifles and looked like they knew from which end the bullets came out. Hunters, or prior military, I thought, so I let my eyes wander while Ruth answered questions and eventually spotted one of the snipers. Overwatch, I guessed, and figured they had two or three more guys out there as backup.

I tuned back in and listened intently as Ruth finished explaining our destination, being more than a little vague about the whereabouts of her family's farm. In response, the older gentleman, at least, older to me since I placed him in his mid thirties, slung his rifle and his two compatriots joined suit.

"Look, we aren't trying to block the road, just deter folks from coming into this part of the park. We got our families in there, you understand? Ya'll can go on ahead and I hope you can get where you're heading. Before you go, can I ask if you have any diesel you can spare? This ain't no toll or nothing like that, but we got a generator running and I was hoping you might have some to trade."

I could tell there was more to it than that, but I wouldn't ask. However, the fact he was asking even though he could have tried to take us, and the truck, spoke to his overall good intentions.

"Yes, sir. We got a little," I said, speaking up for the first time. "I think we can let go of a five gallon can if you can swap me some ammo."

That I said anything seemed to take the gentleman by surprise, and I could tell from the indrawn breath from the back seat that Stan was caught off guard as well. Ruth didn't make a sound, but she did glance my way.

"How much and what caliber?"

I paused, as if to think. I really didn't need anything except some 308 Winchester but I wouldn't ask for that. Diesel was still plentiful, just sitting there in those underground gas station tanks, but I was willing to bet they had already used up a fair portion of their diesel in the camp. Going out to recover more would be a dangerous chore.

“A box of 38 Specials, if you have it.”

The man gave me a look that wrinkled his brow but nodded. Laying my CETME across the seat, I slowly opened the door with exaggerated care. No need to give the watchers any reason to jump to a wrong conclusion.

“Brent, can you run back and get me a box of 38s, please?” The man asked, and gave a little wave as well to his sniper crew, hopefully calling them off. He gave me another encouraging nod and I walked around to the tailgate of the truck, popped the cracked glass door and reached in, again going with very slow motions. We still had three five gallon cans, two full of fuel, and I hefted the one closest to me and lifted it up on the top of the tailgate, then set it on the asphalt.

“Thank you,” the man said, his face relaxed a bit. “We’ve been rationing the diesel but still, running that gennie takes a steady sip of fuel. Need it though, ‘cause two of the little ones are on insulin. We just need to hold out until this mess gets straightened out.”

“I understand, and I wish we could spare more. You tried getting it out of the tanks at a gas station?” I asked, already fearing the answer.

“Yeah, one of our guys is an electrician. He said it takes a three phase generator to run the pumps and we can’t find one that still runs.”

Yep, like a figured. I’d seen the same situation before. Fortunately, I also saw how other folks got around the problem.

“Just get a regular old single phase generator like you have and hook it up to something like a sump pump, I reckon. Just drop a hose in the tank and pull out what you can with your pump. Would be slow, but still you should be able to work something out. As for the insulin, I can’t begin to tell you how to make that.”

The man nodded and stuck out his hand.

“My name’s Richard, but folks call me Rich. That’s a fine idea. We’ll give it a try.”

He paused, and gave me a keen-eyed expression. “You don’t think this is going to get straightened out any time soon, do you?”

“I’m Luke, and no sir, I don’t. Near as I can tell, the rest of the country is like this. No place to really mount a recovery from, if that makes sense.”

He just shook his head, and I wondered if one of those little ones dependent on the insulin was one of his children.

“I get you, Luke. Look, you guys need to be careful up ahead. Like I told your friend, the folks in Bentonville have set up something like a wall around their town and are guarding those Wal-Mart distribution centers like Fort Knox. The other cities in the corridor have followed suit. I think you might be able to scrape through Springdale like Ruth mentioned, but be on the lookout for ambushers. Not everybody is as fair minded as we are, you know.”

"I follow, Rich. If not for the baby we'd still be afoot. Slower but safer that way. We just picked up the truck recently and I hate that big old target on my back."

"I wish I could give you more detail about what you are facing out there, but we haven't strayed far from the Park since we moved in a month ago."

"Why'd you move, if you don't mind me asking?"

Rich laughed. "Most of us lived in a small subdivision over in Lowell. All electric appliances, no water source and the lots were too small to really plant a garden. We had four trucks in the whole community that still ran, so we scouted around until one of us remembered the little cabins in the campground here. No electric, but hand pumps for water and conveniently placed fire rings to build cook fires. All the comforts of home, now. We fish and tend our gardens and watch the roads."

I nodded. All the comforts indeed. Rich didn't mention how they dealt with trespassers and I didn't need to ask. That they were still alive said enough. I decided to share a little more intel, for whatever good it might do.

"Sweet. One last thing and please don't take this the wrong way, okay? If anybody comes around saying they are from the National Guard and tries to get you folks to go to a FEMA camp, just nod your head and play along, then get the hell out of the Park."

"You saying some of these thugs are impersonating the Guard? Seriously?"

"I don't know about whether they are real or not, but just be careful. I saw one of those camps up in Illinois and once they get you inside, good luck getting out alive. The one I saw in Missouri was worse. They might have started off trying to help people. But, with little food and no medical care that I could see, I figured out real quick I had a better chance surviving out in the wild on my own."

"So we have to be ready to fight the Army too?" Rich said, sounding deflated and a little defiant.

"No, I didn't say that. You shouldn't fight them at all if they try to relocate you. Just ask for some time to pack up and pretend to be excited by the prospect of being saved. If you can get them to leave for a later pick up, then haul ass out of the park."

"On the other hand, if they just stop by to check on you, then likely you all should be fine. I've seen some other Guard troops up in Missouri that were just trying to help folks. Distributing water and things like that. I think it depends on the commander of each particular unit."

"How do you know all this? I mean, sure, Missouri is pretty close but how do you know what was going on in Illinois? Is that something you heard somewhere?"

"Saw it with my own eyes. Look, we better get going before your folks and mine start getting worried. So good luck, and I hope I'm wrong about how long this will take to get the power straightened out."

When we got back on the road, driving through the gap in the lane where the SUV had been pushed aside, I was thinking about what Rich had said. Bentonville would definitely make a great target for looters, what with multiple distribution centers situated in the area. Of course, if the Bentonites were manning the ramparts, then the bandits would just have to go elsewhere for their looting and pillaging. Places like the small farms that dotted the rural stretches of country bordering the big cities.

“What was that all about, Luke?” Stan asked, breaking through my woolgathering.

“Selling them the diesel, you mean? Well, it got Rich to loosen up a bit and frankly, I figured out they weren’t going to rob us when he had his snipers stand down.”

“Rich, huh?” Ruth interjected absently. “What all did Rich have to say? He seemed pretty tight lipped when we spoke. And what snipers?”

Though the words came out terse, I knew Ruth was just venting some of the stress we were all feeling.

“Like everybody else, he’s just worried about his family. They are a lot like you guys, Ruth, suburbanites from over near Lowell. They banded together and decided to bug out to the park early on after they figured out the power wasn’t coming back on any time soon. The snipers were just a precaution and I didn’t mention catching sight of them, anyway.”

I went on to expand on what Rich said about Bentonville and the other communities, information that Ruth had already garnered but with more detail. I decided to keep my own counsel regarding the likely implications. The Schecters had enough to worry about at the moment, and I figured Stan would make the connections soon enough. Oh, Ruth was bright, too, but she was still coming to grips with the brutal nature of our new existence.

So we crept along the back country roads that appeared little better than goat paths. Well, maybe not that bad, but these dirt roads showed up on none of the maps I possessed, and the four of us wasted no more of our concentration on anything except scanning our surroundings. I kept the CETME at the ready, and our two back seat gunners did the same. Stan with the semi auto AK clone and Amy holding the M4 we just recently picked up.

My instructions for the girl consisted of little more than “stick the barrel out the window and hold down the trigger until the magazine is empty and repeat as necessary.” I hoped her display of spray and pray would put any attackers off their game. Amy still needed training but by God she was willing. What more could I ask for?

CHAPTER TWO

Three hours after our chance meeting with Rich, Ruth claimed we were on the home stretch and I was ready to kill somebody. Not anybody in the truck, mind you, but twice during our trip the truck took fire, once actually hitting the truck bed, but we never saw the shooters. I was thinking about coming back one night when the moon was down and cutting some throats, starting with those snipers. Satisfying, but ultimately fruitless I decided. Needless to say, my nerves were near shot from the constant state of vigilance, and my traveling companions seemed in a mild state of shock.

Maybe it was all the bodies. Even taking side roads and back streets, we saw constant reminders of the ongoing urban struggle as corpses dotted the landscape. Some fell clumped together, showing signs of making a pathetic last stand before being overwhelmed, while others lay as single islands of stinking decay in the middle of a street that didn't smell much better. All the bodies appeared stripped of anything usable, down to the tattered clothes off their backs. Many looked to have been there for awhile, but a few pools of blood looked dauntingly fresh.

Ruth barely said a word until we turned off the last stretch of asphalt and started down the graveled track to the Keller family farm. That was her maiden name, Keller. Ruth seemed particularly affected by what she had seen, and again I decided that Stan had done his best to protect his wife from the ugliest of conditions out there.

"Here's the curve coming up," Ruth announced. "We won't be able to see from here but I'll bet Daddy has the gate closed. Be ready for me to stop."

The gate, a massive steel pipe affair mounted on even bigger steel well casing posts, was indeed shut and locked. And guarded, but neither Ruth nor Stan seemed concerned as Ruth pulled up next to the gate. Inside the gate I could make out a pair of armed men hunkered down, occupying a heavily sandbagged guard post.

"Mark, you put that gun down and come open this gate. It's Ruth and Stan, and we brought some friends," she called out through the open window and one of the men, a hard faced fellow in his late twenties or early thirties, stepped out from behind the shelter. He lowered the automatic shotgun to the low ready position but did not sling the weapon as he approached. The second guard didn't even pretend to relax.

"Ruthie, I see you and Stan, but I don't recognize your friends." The voice was neutral but held a tight edge. His Spidey sense was likely going off and I knew this was not someone I wanted to spook. The smooth way he moved reminded me of my father when he was home from a deployment. I knew from our conversations that Mark was Ruth's brother, and he was also either active duty military or only recently separated.

"Mark, this here is Luke and Amy. They are new friends, but seeing as how they saved our lives, I figure they are more like family."

Ruth's spoke in a manner that had me snapping to attention. That was a mother's voice, and one that would brook no argument. Stan's clearly uttered "damn

straight” from the back seat seemed to settle any lingering concerns Mark may have had.

“Ya’ll just sit tight and let me get this gate. Momma and Dad are up at the big house and they are going to be tickled. Just about everybody is here and they were startin’ to worry about the three of you.”

Mark moved quickly to unlatch the gate, and Ruth drove over the cattle guard that gave us that familiar bone shaking rattle. Just like coming home, I thought. The driveway meandered for about a quarter mile and I took note of the cleared fence rows and freshly dug post holes of the three strand barbed wire fence lining the crushed stone driveway. Someone had recently done a bit of work around here but if Ruth had it right, they had plenty of extra hands to help out.

After the last slight curve in the road, the trees cleared away enough for me to make out a large two story, wood shingled farm house flanked on both sides by barns, machinery sheds and what looked like a massive chicken house. Behind the corrugated tin of one machine shed, I saw the telltale silhouette of a wooden tower topped with a windmill.

The place looked so much like home I felt tears begin to form at the corners of my eyes and I quickly wiped them away before anyone might notice. This was home and sanctuary for Ruth, Stan, and little Sophia, but just a stopover for me. As for Amy, we would have to see. In a short time, the girl had somehow managed to claim a piece of my heart.

At sixteen, I’d already had a few girlfriends, but nothing serious. Before the world changed, my hormones kept trying to get me into trouble with girls I should have the good sense to be avoiding. “Party girls” was the polite term, but probably fortunately for me, they were more interested in the college boys down the road. Now I had Amy and I wouldn’t say she was my girlfriend, but whatever I felt for her was a real thing.

On the other hand, she was too young for me and the manner of our meeting still bothered me. She was the first real live girl I’d ever seen naked, and the memory of what her kidnappers intended made me want to kill them all over again. Slower this time, and using the skinning knife.

That thought led me to the memory of all the dead naked women and girls I’d seen in the last two months. Victims of murderers and rapists let loose upon the land like a plague. The images were bloody and brutal and I only got them out of my head through sheer force of will. Shutting off those dark recollections, I tried to focus on the here and now as I realized Ruth had stopped the truck in front of the big house and killed the engine.

Before the rumble of the diesel faded I saw people start spilling out the front door like a kicked ant hill. From the happy faces and broad smiles I reckoned we were in for that friendly reception Ruth promised, and I eased the CETME down and flipped on the safety.

"Safety on, Amy," I said conversationally over my shoulder. Ruth was already out the door and buried in happy embraces. An older couple stood nearby and from the resemblance between Ruth and the fifty-something lady, these had to be her parents.

"My daddy taught me the only sure safety is to keep your finger off the trigger," she quipped back but I heard a sharp click anyway.

"Yep" Stan agreed with a laugh. "But it's the thought that counts. These are good folks, the Kellers, but I'm sure some will be watchful."

"Well, they sure should be. But I'm probably not the right person to point that out," I replied with my own chuckle as the two of us got out of the truck. When I glanced back, Amy had set her rifle aside and was carefully extracting Sophia from her car seat. The little girl seemed disturbed by the commotion and Amy had Sophia cradled in her arms, rocking ever so slightly. The sight made my heart melt a bit.

After all the hugging and backslapping wound down, Ruth reclaimed Sophia and I was briefly introduced to Darwin and Hazel Keller. The older couple turned out to indeed be Ruth's parents and she was their youngest, the baby according to Hazel, a happy grin plastered on her face. I understood her happiness, since both of Ruth's older brothers and apparently their families were already here. I'd met Mark at the gate and now the oldest of the Keller boys, Nicholas, was introduced to me as well.

Nick was in his mid thirties and had his father's long face and prominent chin. He was stocky and stood a little shorter than me at maybe six feet even. I noticed a scar on his left cheek, a thin white track slightly curved at the end like a fish hook, and he caught me looking as we all made our way onto the wide front porch of the farm house.

"Sorry," I murmured before continuing, "Shrapnel?"

"Yeah. How'd you know? You look awful young to be prior service," Nick replied, and I saw a kernel of suspicion form in his eyes. I'll bet he thought maybe deserter, so I decided to nip that concern in the bud by telling the truth.

"No military for me sir. Still too young to even enlist yet. No, my dad has a scar just like that on his shoulder from when he was in the Marines. "

"Gotcha. Picked this up back in '08. Your family around here? Is that why you hitched a ride?"

Stan's laugh interrupted the interrogation, and he patted his brother-in-law on the shoulder as he limped along beside us.

"Let's get inside and you can get's Luke's story then. He's only had time to tell a little of it, but man, is it wild."

"What do you mean?" Nick's caution was evident and I didn't blame him one bit. In this new world, I was an unknown, a potential threat here in the middle of his family. That was the main reason I left my rifle in the truck and indicated for Amy to do

the same. Side arms were one thing, since everybody seemed to be wearing them, but long arms might look too much like a threat. Provocative, I thought as I unpacked that word from my vocabulary.

Stan picked up on Nick's caution and hastened to reassure his wife's brother.

"Nick, these are good people, good kids. Like Ruth told Mark before, they saved our lives. Literally. Didn't have to, didn't even know us, but risked their lives because it was the right thing to do."

Stan held up his hands in a pushing motion, meant to move us all along, which was funny since he was the one with the bum ankle.

"What I meant about Luke is that he's come a long ways on foot and seen a lot of the country. He might be able to shed some light on the real conditions out there. He sure did for me."

Nick's face went neutral and I figured this guy would be an easy mark if we ever had a chance to play poker. Yes, I knew how to play, learned it from my grandfather, and that old man was a serious card shark. Cleaned out my allowance twice before I started paying closer attention to not just the cards but also the player.

"That right? Where you coming from?"

I nodded. I expected an interrogation but hoped to get fed first.

"Chicago. Started out a week after the lights went out and I've still got a ways to go."

With that, our little group stepped up on the porch and into the front room of the farmhouse. Amy, who had not said a word since exiting the truck, moved forward and linked her arm through mine. I could tell she was a little overwhelmed by the press of new people but she didn't complain or shy away. This girl, or young woman, continued to impress me every day and I was forced to wonder what our future held.

Did we have a future? Or would our existence continue to be day by day, a constant struggle to survive? All I knew was nobody was shooting at us at the moment. Some days, that was all you could hope for in this starving, fallen world.